

Do No Harm

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/22724590) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/22724590>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death
Category:	Gen , M/M
Fandom:	Thor (Movies) , Doctor Strange (2016) , Marvel Cinematic Universe
Relationship:	Loki/Stephen Strange , Loki & Thor (Marvel) , Stephen Strange & Wong , Loki & Wong (Marvel) , Loki & Stephen Strange & Wong
Character:	Loki (Marvel) , Stephen Strange , Thor (Marvel) , Wong (Marvel)
Additional Tags:	Endgame Loki , Post-Canon , Unhappy Ending , Brother Feels , Canon-Typical Violence , Loki (Marvel) Has Issues , suicide ideation , Slow Burn , POV Loki (Marvel) , Unreliable Narrator , Heavy Angst , Sex , Language , Bisexual Loki (Marvel) , Bisexual Stephen Strange , Genderfluid Loki (Marvel) , briefly , short appearances by the Doctor Strange supporting cast , Romance , Tragic Romance , Multiverse , The Tesseract (Marvel) , Strangers to Lovers
Collections:	Marvel Rare Pair Bang 2019
Stats:	Published: 2020-02-14 Completed: 2020-03-12 Chapters: 19/19 Words: 69399

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by [AuroraWest](#), [the_genderman](#)

Summary

When Loki stole the Tesseract from the Avengers, he hadn't been trying to break the universe. Nor had he anticipated a wizard saving his life.

Now, Loki finds himself in the New York Sanctum, helping Stephen Strange hold the universe together—while he himself falls apart. But trouble finds the God of Mischief whether he invites it or not, and good things don't last for Loki. As his universe crumbles and takes another with it, he'll be faced with a choice: the greater good or the people he loves.

Notes

Written for the Marvel Rare Pair Bang 2019. Art by the amazing [the_genderman](#).

Chapter 1



*Let everything happen to you
Beauty and terror
Just keep going
No feeling is final*

Rainer Maria Rilke

Everything was black and red and white and loud soft loud soft insanity, static in his ears, static in his brain, fade in out pain and then no more fading out, just pain, more and more of it.

Machine noise. Screaming. Wailing.

“Jesus Christ, Stephen—”

Why didn't you listen to me—

“What the hell did this?”

“Trust me, you don't want to know.”

Bodies. Death. Kree. And more. Skrull. Krylor. Xandarian. Damn.

Damn.

move, out of the way, it's coming, you brought this

your fault

your fault

“He’s flatlining.”

“Even if I can stop the bleeding, he’s going to need a transfusion—”

“Yeah, *that* might be a problem...”

Bleeding, he was bleeding, his brother was bleeding, his brother was

no

Stop.

Another machine scream of warning. “I’m losing him.”

this was what magic was for

So reach for it, make it do what you want, it’s yours, Loki (that was Mother’s voice), it’s not about bending it to your will, it’s about finding it, becoming it.

Come on, Master of Magic.

(that wasn’t his mother’s voice, that was the voice that had kept him alive after The Fall, but it might as well have been her, she was the one who’d kept him on this side of the event horizon, who’d kept him from losing himself completely)

Black and white, pain, static in his brain. A little green. Blue at the edges of his awareness. A little less red.

And then just black.

Loki didn’t know it was possible for everything to hurt this much and to still be alive.

That was a lie.

He’d been in terrible pain before and he’d made it through. Maybe not intact, but close enough. Of course, maybe *this* was death. But it didn’t sound the way he’d always imagined Hel would. There was a clock ticking somewhere, and—a kettle whistling? It didn’t feel much like Hel, either. Again, only the way he’d imagined it. It had never been high on his list of places to visit, even though he’d assumed that it was where he’d be ending up after his death. No, he was pretty certain that right now, he was on a bed, his arms resting on a scratchy wool blanket. And furthermore, he thought the bright warmth on his hands and eyelids was the sun.

The sounds were a bit harder to test, but the rest of it was something he could confirm or deny with little effort. Though, he had to be honest, the idea of opening his eyes seemed herculean.

He breathed in. It hurt. But he scrunched his eyes shut tighter, told himself it was only pain—and what was more of that?—and filled his lungs as best he could.

And was rewarded for it with a coughing fit. Spasms of agony ripped through him and all that effort to take the breath was instantly nullified as he choked and wheezed. It took a few minutes for it to stop, by which time, opening his eyes *really* felt like too much effort.

How defeatist.

Gritting his teeth (those hurt too, somehow), he forced his eyes open, then forced them to *stay*

open.

He was in a bed, in a room, with the curtains wide open at the sides of a window, through which the sun was streaming.

And he wasn't alone.

"Good morning," said the man who was sitting, hands folded in his lap, in a chair to the side of the bed. "Actually, afternoon. How are you feeling?"

Loki wet his lips, then pressed them together. There was a book open in the man's lap, as though he'd been sitting there for awhile, keeping himself entertained while Loki lay unconscious.

The idea didn't thrill him.

The man was still looking at him, expecting an answer. Or perhaps trying to ascertain whether Loki *could* answer. It was an open question. Breathing and opening his eyes were one thing. Speaking? Possibly beyond his ability.

For the moment that it took to gather his reserves of strength, he studied the man. Short brown hair, gray at the temples. Neither old nor young by human standards. Somewhere in between. His expression was entirely unreadable. He was dressed in blue and black in a robe that was belted around the waist, and a pair of leather gloves were draped over one of the arms of the chair. There was some kind of amulet, shaped like an eye, with intricate metal-work in its center, around his neck, resting on his chest. Of course, none of that mattered all that much—the only thing that mattered was the power that Loki could feel radiating off him.

This man was a sorcerer.

Shit. Odin's beard, blood and guts, Norns help him, was it—?

Loki reached with his mind for the Tesseract in the pocket of magical space he kept it hidden in. If it was gone, if he'd lost it during the battle and the resultant hours...or days...or who knew how long, of unconsciousness, then—

But his senses came up against the cube's power. Still there. Safe. He relaxed, his shoulders unknitting just a little. The relief at finding the Tesseract still hidden and on his person gave him the strength to finally respond to the man, "Bad. Very bad."

His voice was hoarse, but at least it worked. The man nodded, "You *did* almost die, so that's not totally unexpected." Holding out his hands, he made a circle with them about six inches across and said, "You had a hole that big in your chest. Had to do a skin graft. I hope you didn't have any scars you were particularly attached to." When Loki just stared at him, he stood up, gestured, and asked, "Mind if I check on it?"

Loki shook his head. Easier not to talk.

The man got to his feet and approached, then gently lifted the blanket and sheet away from Loki's chest. He hadn't even realized he wasn't wearing a shirt. The man studied him. Loki tried to look at the damage that had been done to him. His memories of how it had happened were hazy. It was too much effort to lift his head, so he just let it flop back onto the pillow and watched the man's face. After a minute, he moved his hand so he could put it on Loki's skin. It was enough time to see that his hand had a pronounced tremor. Whoever had done the surgery that had saved Loki's life, it probably hadn't been him. At least, hopefully not. He'd never been particularly vain about his scars, but a hand that shook *that* badly would probably leave a nasty one.

After feeling around for a minute, the man nodded and said, “Looks good. It’s healing well.”

As he took a step away from the bed, Loki watched him, furrowing his brow, then asked, “Where am I?”

Pulling his gloves on, the man said, “The New York Sanctum. I was...advised against bringing you here, but there weren’t a lot of options. I think the Feds might still be after you, and leaving you at the hospital for them to find you seemed a little too un-Hippocratic Oath.” When Loki stared at him blankly, he said, “The Hippocratic Oath? Do no harm?” This didn’t clarify anything, so he shrugged. “My name is Doctor Stephen Strange, by the way.”

Swallowing to try to make his voice come out as slightly less of a croak, Loki said, “You’re a sorcerer.” His voice was still croaky, so, chalk that up as a failure. There had probably been tubes down his throat while the doctors had operated on him, but this felt like it was the result of something else.

He remembered screaming.

With effort, he made himself stop remembering.

Nodding, the man—Stephen Strange—said, “Yes. My order protects Earth from threats that are slightly more...metaphysical, let’s say, than aliens or robots.”

Loki’s guard had gone up without him realizing it. Or rather, Loki’s guard never went down, but this put him on high alert. This man’s Hippocratic Oath and doing no harm might not extend to someone like him. Though—hadn’t he said he thought someone was still after Loki? Did Strange know who he was?

After a moment, Strange said, “Get some more rest. I’m glad you woke up. It means you probably will again.” This last part was added wryly and Loki couldn’t help snorting. Trying to, at least. On the exhale, he started coughing again.

As Strange opened the door to leave, Loki managed to stop him with, “Wait.” When Strange turned, Loki said, “You didn’t ask who I am.” Bravado and contrariness made him say it as though his identity was something to be proud of, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Tilting his head, Strange said, “Because I know who you are, Loki of Asgard.”

Loki swallowed. His throat felt scraped raw, like he was coughing up shards of glass. “Don’t call me that. Asgard is gone.” Not exactly true, and yet, somehow also a deeper truth than words could ever capture. “At least, it might as well be.”

“Fine.” Strange regarded him. “Just Loki, then? The architect of the Battle of New York.”

At that, Loki laughed a little, which turned into another cough. “Not the architect,” he finally choked out. Taking several deep breaths, he added, “Just a fool.” It bore thinking about, though. Who he was. If not Loki of Asgard, then what? He would never call himself an Odinson again, no matter his bond with Thor.

There was something he thought he should be thinking about, but he remembered that he didn’t want to remember.

So he didn’t. Thor was his brother, but Loki wasn’t an Odinson. And he wouldn’t take the name of the biological father who had cast him out to die.

Just Loki, then.

Strange was impossible to read and Loki wasn't exactly at his peak mentally at that moment. Still, he couldn't help trying, and failing, to do it, even though he couldn't see past the man's faint smile. It was a smile that gave nothing away, which was something Loki was quite good at himself. He wasn't sure if he respected the fact that Strange was playing a game he knew so well or if it rankled him. Of course, the only thing he was really sure of was that he was in pain, and increasingly, that he just wanted to sleep.

Resting his hands against his sides, Strange watched Loki, then said, "The fact that you recognize it makes me think it isn't the case anymore."

What, that he wasn't a fool? Strange was wrong there. But the effort to tell him so was too much. As he closed his eyes, it occurred to him that he had no reason to trust this man, that letting his guard down to fall asleep was a Very Bad Idea, but his body simply couldn't hang on to consciousness. He slipped away into sleep, registering the click of the door closing behind Strange just before there was nothing but black.

Chapter 2

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



This is a dream, but this is also how it happened.

"Where have you been?"

"Oh, here and there. Why? Come to kill me at last, brother?"

"Don't be stupid."

Loki laughs, a hard, angry, desperately sad laugh. It was so much work, so much hard-won effort, to convince himself in the time since the Battle of New York that the connections he'd forged had replaced his family, replaced Thor. Across the galaxy, across time, he'd met people and they'd mattered, and he'd been better for it. All that work, and all Thor has to do is show up to bring all of it crashing down. None of them mattered as much as his brother. Loki's fists clench but it doesn't stop the tears from pricking at his eyes. "What do you want?"

Thor steps forward, looking as sad as Loki won't let himself feel. As he tells himself he doesn't feel. Thor's hammer is in his hand but he looks like he's forgotten it's there. "I just want to talk. There are things you should know, brother. And things that I would say to you, if you'll let me."

Swallowing, trying to make his breath heave a little less with emotion, Loki says, "The last time we 'talked,' you muzzled and chained me."

"You stabbed me," Thor counters. Then, like an afterthought, he adds, "And tried to rule Earth." But he rubs the heel of one hand against his forehead and says wearily, "This isn't what I came to say. I'm sorry, brother."

Loki sniffs. "Apology accepted. Conditional on what else you have to say."

"That is what I have to say. I'm sorry."

Everything goes still, Loki included. Even stiller than he is normally. The stillness of the world is the dream, it didn't really happen like that, even if it feels like it should have.

Then the sky splits open, fills with a sick black un-color, the color of bile and old blood, of a mind split open and turned over on itself, the color of horror and loss, and this was definitely not how things had happened, they'd had more time than this, but Thor is swallowed by it and—

And Loki woke up.

Sweating, of course. Sitting bolt upright. His nightmares had always tended towards the vivid and horrifying. It had gotten worse since Thanos. Even by those standards, this had been bad.

He put his hands in his lap, clenching them tightly together to make them stop shaking, and drew in a deep, slow breath. At least he was alone in the room this time, so there was no one to see this weakness. As his heart slowed, he glanced down to where the sheet had fallen away when he'd sat up. Sitting up, incidentally, was a good sign. Nothing was ever certain, but he probably wasn't going to die.

There was an angry red circle traced on his chest, just below his heart and extending to his stomach, with stitches all around it. Delicately, Loki touched the new skin. Strange hadn't said if it was his or someone else's. If it was the latter, then this could be the humanity that everyone always looked for in him.

His throat didn't hurt as much anymore. Nothing hurt as much anymore, actually. Experimentally, he tried stretching his arms over his head. The stitches on his chest pulled, which certainly didn't feel *good*, and he still felt achy, but he was able to move everything without much more than a grimace of pain. He flexed his feet, then drew his knees up. His legs were stiff and sore, but they worked.

Wiggling his toes one last time, he pulled the sheet and blanket off and swung his legs out of bed. Sometime between the battle and now, he'd been put in a pair of too-large sweatpants that said 'NY GIANTS' down one leg. Someone had a sense of humor, and it would have to be the Norns or the universe, since no one on Earth knew his true heritage.

He looked down at his chest and touched it again, a heavy weight pressing from both inside and outside his ribcage as his fingers brushed the graft. It had nothing to do with the injury and the new skin, which he could barely feel his fingers on. There had been no mention from Strange of anyone else that had been brought to the hospital with him.

Of course there wasn't. There hadn't been. Loki had seen what had happened. Thor had—

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His lungs only filled halfway. He felt like he was choking. Drowning.

Stop. Stop.

Don't think about that.

Another breath then, and another, until his hands stopped shaking and the lump in his throat receded enough for him to swallow. He clenched his fists and tried not to remember Thor's face as he'd pushed Loki out of the way—

His nails dug into his palms. His fault. He was a fool, and it had finally caught up with him in a way that he could never take back.

A broken, consuming despair held him pinned in place. Gradually, though, the outside world penetrated this blackness. There was the faint sound of traffic, a quiet *whoosh* of cars going by on the street. Pigeons cooed somewhere near the window. Loki opened his eyes and looked towards it. Weak sunlight was shining in, with the shadows of clouds passing over the sun. If he'd woken yesterday in the afternoon, then it must be morning now.

He glanced around the room and spotted his clothing draped over a chair. Most of it was in bad shape. His leathers had clearly been cut off him in the hospital, and the longcoat had been torn to shreds along the bottom. There were singe marks, too. His pants were better, but there were holes in the knees and dark splatters that he knew were blood.

His tunic was in one piece, though, and he pulled it on, grateful for the familiarity of it. The soft Asgardian cotton didn't irritate his injury. Looking down at himself, he had to snort. The sweatpants and the tunic were really a look. He could only imagine the state his hair was in. What he could see on his shoulders was a mess. When he reached up to touch it, his fingers met matted snarls. For now, he waved his fingers to cast a glamor and make it look presentable.

The magic took more effort than he expected it to, and he had to put a hand out to rest on the back of the chair where his clothes were to catch his breath. Something had drained all his magic away, but he didn't know what. There was a hole in his memory to go with the hole in his chest, and he didn't want to probe it.

Once he'd gotten his breath back, he straightened up and looked at the door. Strange hadn't said he couldn't leave the room. Then again, Strange had probably assumed he wouldn't be getting up any time soon. Aforementioned six inch hole in his chest and whatnot. And it would only take someone of middling intelligence to realize that wandering around in a sorcerer's house could have nasty repercussions.

Loki's intelligence far surpassed 'middling,' but he was also curious. And frankly, he wouldn't be the God of Mischief if he missed an opportunity to snoop where he didn't belong. The sun seemed to have gone entirely behind the clouds now, anyway, and it made the room feel cold.

When he opened the door, he found himself on the second level of a large, dimly lit house. The sense of power hit him even harder. This wasn't just a house. What had Strange called it? The New York Sanctum. Obviously more than what it seemed. He took a step out, the floor cold under his bare feet, and rested his hands on the railing that ran around the second level. Below him was a large, open foyer. The only way down seemed to be the large staircase opposite where Loki was standing, so he headed towards it, then walked down the stairs slowly, gazing around the foyer.

Doors branched off from there. Through one, he could see a kitchen, and through another, a dining room, both empty. Did Strange live here alone? What did he say he did—protected the Earth from metaphysical threats? It would get lonely being here by yourself.

Loki made his way across the foyer, his bare feet silent on the floor, and stuck his head through the other open door. It was just a kitchen. Nothing special. Next to it was a dining room. The third door led to a study with a fireplace in it, currently cold.

His eyes drifted to the staircase, and then the smaller one, leading up to the third floor. There had to be *something* interesting in this house. Quietly, he made his way up to the third floor.

He was instantly rewarded as he went up the staircase and his head poked up to eye level with the floor. He stood there, looking around, and then he ascended the remaining steps.

In one direction lay an empty space, dominated by a massive, round window with opaque white

glass and metal spokes swooping across it. In the other was something far more interesting. He headed there, finding himself in a room full of glass cases containing objects, like some kind of museum. Loki made his way inside, passing by each case slowly to study the artifacts within. The Talisman of Abraxas. The Axe of Angarrumus. A...tarot deck? He stopped there, quirking an eyebrow, but figured it must have powers of some kind, or it wouldn't be here. The next case was empty, but the placard inside read, "Cloak of Levitation." That sounded handy. And it was certainly more immediately impressive than a ratty old tarot deck. He stared at the empty case, wondering where the cloak was, and then, right on the heels of that thought, wondering what spells he'd need to circumvent to get at the rest of these objects. That axe wasn't exactly subtle, but having a magical axe also didn't seem like a bad idea, considering the things he'd seen.

"Who told you that you could come in here?" a voice said from behind him.

Loki straightened up and turned away from the case. There was a man standing behind him. Not Strange. His robes were red, and he looked—possibly older? There was no amulet around his neck, either. That was something special of Strange's, then. Cocking his head, Loki replied, "No one told me I *couldn't*."

"We didn't think you'd be able to get out of bed for another few days." The man added something in a mutter under his breath that sounded like, "Stephen is too trusting," then said, "You're *not* allowed in here. Now someone's told you."

Lifting his eyes to look around the room, Loki said, "What's so special about it?" He was being glib. Somebody a fraction as skilled as he was would have been able to feel the magic in these items. It surprised him that they hadn't wreathed the doorway in protective spells to make sure no one could get in. Well, like this man had said, they didn't expect him to get up so soon.

Also, *they*. Strange wasn't here alone. Eyeing this new man, Loki wondered what exactly he was dealing with. The man in front of him was clearly a sorcerer, too. Wait—Strange had said his *order* protected the Earth. His brain felt fuzzy when he tried to remember yesterday's conversation, and while there was some temptation to blame it on Strange or this new man casting a spell on him, he knew it was entirely down to what he'd been through. The physical wounds were bad enough; the magic drain was another layer of trauma, and what he'd lost—

Well, maybe it *was* impressive that he was up and about, even though, if these people knew anything about Asgardians, they'd know they were a sturdy bunch. So were Frost Giants.

The man didn't answer Loki's question, just held out an arm and raised his eyebrows meaningfully, as though he was doing Loki a favor and escorting him out. With a sniff, Loki walked back towards the door. But on his way, another room caught his eye. "Is that a library?" he asked in interest.

"You're not allowed there, either," the man said.

Loki pursed his lips at him, and as they returned to the foyer on the first floor, he asked, "If I might be so forward, who are *you*?"

"I'm the Librarian," the man said.

Snorting, Loki said, "Aren't librarians supposed to *encourage* the use of their libraries?"

Glaring at him, the man said, "Our libraries contain books teaching us how to defend Earth against beings like *you*. Allowing you access to it is counterproductive."

With a small smile and a sarcastic glint in his eyes, Loki said, "Oh, I haven't tried to take over this

planet in *years*. Don't get your robes in a twist." Strange had taken him by surprise the previous day by knowing who he was, and even more by surprise with his lack of hysteria about the Battle of New York. People treating him as though he wasn't a monster always took him by surprise. Which also meant he didn't know how to deal with them.

But this? Easy. Sarcasm and the biting smile that suggested he'd do it all over again, just for fun.

The reaction was minimal, but there was just enough tightening around the Librarian's eyes to have made it worth it. "You're not giving me any reason not to advise Stephen that you're more trouble than you're worth."

At that, Loki laughed. "Of course I'm more trouble than I'm worth, Librarian. Ask anybody. Ask my broth—" But his throat closed as he realized what he'd been about to say, and how very, very impossible that was. He clenched his fists. "Advise away. I won't weep if you turn me loose on the world again."

That had been to get a reaction. He'd done nothing but try to protect Midgard for years now. Was it years? It got a bit muddled with all the time travel. Yes, maybe at first he'd been angry, confused, lost, hurt—he perhaps hadn't had Earth's best interests at heart in the days and weeks after he'd absconded with the Tesseract from Stark Tower. Things had changed since then, though. It had been six years, after all. But if this Librarian was going to be the way he was being, then Loki would be who the universe expected him to be.

The Librarian opened his mouth to respond, but suddenly, the front door opened and a figure came in, dripping wet and shaking his coat out. "You should've warned me it was supposed to rain this morning, and I take *no* responsibility for your sandwich if it didn't make it, that's on you for not checking the hourly forecast—" He turned around and Loki saw that it was Strange. The other man's eyes flicked between the two of them, surprise passing across his face for a fraction of a second. Then he smiled dryly. "I see you two have met."

"I caught him in the Chamber of Relics," the Librarian said. "And what do you mean, my sandwich might not have made it? Didn't you put it under your coat?"

Making a face laced with equal parts disgust and incredulity, Strange said, "No, I didn't put it under my coat, are you kidding? My attachment to the material world may be waning, but that doesn't mean I want grease on the lining of this thing." The Librarian looked crestfallen, which was honestly the most emotion Loki had seen him display. "What about you?" Strange asked, gesturing towards Loki. "I got a reuben and pastrami on rye, any preference? Unless Wong wants to give up his tuna melt. You're not a vegetarian, are you? I figured Asgardians didn't really go in for vegetarianism, but you know what they say about assuming. So?"

"Er," Loki said.

"Yeah, good choice." Strange casually flicked a hand and his sodden coat disappeared, and then he held out the brown paper bag, looking at it critically. "I think we're okay. C'mon, let's have lunch." With that, he strode briskly into the dining room, leaving the Librarian and Loki standing there in the foyer.

"I'm not giving up my tuna melt," the Librarian said stiffly, as though this was something that actually needed to be addressed. When he followed Strange into the dining room, Loki trailed after both of them.

Strange was taking the sandwiches out of the bag and setting them on the dining room table. "Did you two do introductions?" When silence met these words, he looked unsurprised, then waved a

hand vaguely from one of them to the other. “Wong, Loki. Loki, Wong.”

Wong pulled out a chair and sat, unwrapping his sandwich and clearly keeping an eye on Loki. Loki just stood there. This sorcerer, this Doctor Strange, kept wrong-footing him, which wasn’t a feeling he was used to. Or one he particularly appreciated. Why was he here? Was he a prisoner?

“Are you just going to stand there?” Strange asked, after sitting down himself and taking a bite of his sandwich.

“I’m still deciding,” Loki replied.

The chair across from Strange scraped on the floor as it moved away from the table of its own accord. “We don’t bite,” Strange said. “I mean, foreplay aside.”

Wong rolled his eyes and Strange grinned. Loki just watched Strange, refusing to rise to the bait. He was over a thousand years old, he’d heard sex jokes before. But Strange’s smile was disarming, and it made Loki want to believe, despite a lack of evidence, that Strange meant him no harm.

So he sat down slowly and ate his sandwich, listening to Strange and Wong talk about their business. No doubt none of it was sensitive information, considering a stranger was sitting at the table with them. Not just any stranger, either. Loki took some pride in that, though maybe there was no pride to be found in not being trusted.

“So why *were* you in the Chamber of Relics?” Strange suddenly said. His tone was pleasant, but there was a penetrating glint in his eyes as he looked at Loki.

Loki met his gaze placidly, with perhaps the tiniest smile on his lips. “Just exploring. Why? Is there something in this house you don’t want me to see?”

“That should go without saying,” Wong said, though with less of the rancor that he’d shown earlier. Apparently the librarian got cranky when he was hungry.

Strange looked at Loki. Then he said, “Wong has a point.”

Leaning back in his chair, Loki asked, “Ah. And is Wong in charge?”

Strange chuckled, clearly seeing through what Loki was trying to do. “No one’s ‘in charge.’” At this, Wong made a noise, and Strange glanced at him, then down at the amulet he wore around his neck. Then, he pointed at the now-empty sandwich wrapping in front of Loki and asked, “Done?” Without waiting for an answer, he vanished the paper. He was showing off. Did he think Loki would be impressed by parlor tricks? Loki was one of the most powerful sorcerers in the Nine Realms. He’d been taught by Frigga, herself raised by witches. A mortal wizard was no match for him.

Maybe that was the point. Maybe Strange was trying to lull him into a false sense of security. Perhaps he was far more powerful than he was letting on. “You’re a guest here,” Strange said. “My guest, actually, since Wong doesn’t seem to want to claim you. Just keep that in mind.”

“That sounds like a threat,” Loki said.

“Stephen doesn’t really make threats,” Wong said. “He takes being a doctor too seriously.”

“Huh.” Strange snorted. “I was going to say something like, ‘you’ll know when we’re threatening you’—I mean, that sounds scarier, right?”

Looking mildly chagrined, Wong said, “Sorry, I didn’t realize we were doing a thing—”

“No, we weren’t—” Strange waved a hand. “Never mind.”

Loki’s gaze shifted from one of them to the other. “So,” he said, “just to be clear, *are* you threatening me?”

“No,” Strange said.

“We should be,” Wong muttered.

When Loki raised his eyebrows, Strange said, “You’ll have to forgive Wong. He’s taken really naturally to the whole librarian personality, you know, naturally distrustful, always convinced there’s something shady going on when you’re just trying to take a book out.”

Wong stared at Strange flatly. “Who hurt you?”

“Mrs. Costellano, PS 158. Wouldn’t let me check out anything above a third grade reading level even though I was reading adult fiction by first grade.”

With a sigh, Wong said, “Why do I bother?”

Strange cocked his head. “Not sure.”

Wong shook his head but didn’t otherwise seem particularly fazed by this. As he got up from the table, he said more seriously, “I have to spend some time this afternoon checking on—that thing that we need to keep tabs on.”

Waving a hand, Strange said, “Of course. Let me know, will you?” Wong nodded and held a hand out in front of him, then circled the other. A circle of orange opened up in the air, spinning and spitting sparks. Loki didn’t react, but his mind was screaming at him. *Magic*. Sorcery. How were they doing it? Inside the circle was another room that he didn’t recognize from what he’d seen of the house—anyway, the light was different there, like it was a different time of day. Wong stepped through, and the circle closed behind him.

Loki stared at the spot where the portal had been, and then he looked at Strange. The other man was already looking at him, an unreadable expression on his face. Loki had a million questions. How had Wong done that? Where had the energy come from? Where had it *gone*? Where had this magic been hiding on Earth?

It made him feel the same way as when he’d been a child and his mother had performed magic in front of him for the first time. The opening of an entire world that he’d never seen before, knowing there was something that the universe had kept hidden from him, but which he was suddenly privy to, and could *learn* about, if he chose to—

Wait, he was getting ahead of himself. The chances of Strange and Wong teaching him how to do what they did were remote. He was still...well, who he was. An unlikely candidate, in other words, to be entrusted with another source of power.

Instead of letting on that he was thinking any of this, Loki just said, “You *are* the one in charge, aren’t you?”

Strange looked uncomfortable for the first time, but it passed quickly. Instead of answering, he said, “How’s the graft?”

“You’d have to tell me.”

“Hm.” Pushing his chair back and standing up, Strange said, “I’ll check it later. There’s no overwhelming stench of wound putrefaction coming off you.” Loki snorted and Strange smiled a little. “I’m guessing it can wait a few hours. You shouldn’t push yourself, by the way, considering you were basically dead six days ago.”

Six days ago. Simple math. He’d been unconscious for four days. Loki raised an eyebrow. “Basically dead?”

With a shrug, Strange said, “Your heart stopped. Not actually dead, but it sounds more dramatic. The point is, you’re not well. Don’t get into anything that looks like you shouldn’t get into. I’ve been here for two years and sometimes I still stumble across things that require...quick thinking.” He paused. “I’m assuming you can tell when you’re looking at something you shouldn’t get into?”

Did it need to be said that Loki was adept at determining when he was being presented with something that he definitely should leave alone, and that it was precisely the fact that he *shouldn’t* get into whatever it was that made him decide to do so? But perhaps the wizard had a point. Still, he didn’t answer, just smiled a little crookedly.

Strange met his eyes. “I’m going to need you to say something.”

“I’ll do my best to stay out of mischief,” Loki said, with the same smile still on his face. It wasn’t convincing, but apparently Strange realized it was the best he was going to get. He gave Loki one more unreadable look, then left the room.

Loki leaned back in his chair and put his hands on the table. The wound on his chest was beginning to ache. But it would heal soon enough, and then he could leave this strange—no pun intended—place.

Where would he go? It didn’t matter. Away. Somewhere else. *Anywhere* else. Somewhere new, where nothing would make him remember. The wound hurt more at the thought and something else, something deeper, which a more sentimental person might call his heart. He forced the feeling down. Sentiment, after all, had never gotten him anywhere.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you thank you thank you again to my wonderful artist, the_genderman, whose art appears in this chapter!



Thor doesn't want to talk about it. Loki doesn't really want to hear about it, honestly, but he has to. It's home, even if he ran from it years ago. Deep down, he always figured he'd go back one day. That possibility no longer exists.

"She says she's Odin's firstborn," Thor finally says, as he passes Loki the flask.

Loki holds the flask to his lips before drinking. "She's your sister?"

"She's our sister," Thor says. Loki just makes a noise. "She killed everyone who opposed her. I spent a year trying to keep her from taking over the Nine Realms, but—" Thor stops, swallows, opens his mouth, but can't go on.

Loki finally drinks. The alcohol goes down like liquid fire, burning his throat and sitting in his stomach smoldering. He forgot how potent this stuff is. Still, it's no wonder Thor wanted to drink it. There are whole worlds of grief and failure unspoken in his 'but.' "Where is she now?" Loki asks.

For a minute, Thor doesn't speak. Then he says, "I don't know. But soft spots were opening up in Asgard. I fear she's joined Ultimus."

Had Thor been so forthcoming when this had actually happened? Had Loki? His dreams had a way of smoothing the awkwardness and rough edges from their relationship, of glossing over the distrust, the long silences, the inability of either of them to speak to each other like what they were,

which was family. Brothers. Brothers, despite everything.

“Then she’s a fool,” Loki says. “Ultimus will use her, and then he’ll kill her. Either way—” Here, he has to pause to take a breath. “Either way, Asgard is lost.”

“Don’t you care?” Thor asks. He stretches his hand out for the flask and Loki hands it back. Darkness presses in around them. They’re hiding out in an abandoned building. A soft spot opened up here a few months ago, the walls between dimensions weakening the structure of the building itself. And then, of course, there were the things that came through.

The soft spot is closed now, but no one’s come back to the building.

Loki thinks about how he’s going to answer Thor’s question. Nothing good has ever come of him caring. Then again, nothing good has ever come of him pretending that he doesn’t, either. “Of course I care,” he finally says. Admitting this feels like...like he’s just done something momentous. Saying words that come so easily to others shouldn’t feel like such an achievement, but it does. And it’s clear, when their eyes meet, that Thor thinks so too.

There’s another silence. Outside, in the distance, sirens wail. There’s a skittering sound from somewhere overhead. Loki hopes it’s just rats.

Then, Thor reaches out, puts his hand on Loki’s shoulder. “We’ll fix this together, brother.”

There was another time that Thor said this to him. Then, Loki rejected it. This time, he decides to allow Thor to delude both of them, instead of just himself, and he nods.

Loki opened his eyes. Morning in the Sanctum again. Another dream of his brother, this one somehow worse for the fact that it was pure memory. He laid in bed, his breathing slow, trying to decide if he wanted to forget the dream or cling to it.

He sat up. His clothes were still draped over the chair, destroyed and bloody. At some point, he’d have to do something about that, but for now, it was sweatpants and his tunic again. At least the sweatpants were comfortable, if embarrassingly unstylish, in a way that was very particular to Earth. They really knew how to make an unflattering garment on this planet.

As he pulled his clothes on and opened the door to the bedroom, he wondered if Strange and Wong were in. For the past three days, they’d been in and out, flitting through their portals and almost as frequently, through three doors on the third floor that all bore variations of the same symbol. Loki hadn’t been caught studying them yet, nor had he tried opening one. The doors were clearly in the ‘something he shouldn’t be getting into’ category, and he wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to be seen when he *did* investigate where they led.

To be honest, though, he thought he knew. When Strange had checked how Loki’s wound was healing yesterday, he’d mentioned two other Sanctums that fulfilled the same role as this one did. Two of the doors, he was sure, led to those other Sanctums. The third was more of a mystery.

He’d also mentioned, as his fingers had felt around the stitches, that it was amazing how fast Loki was healing, and that pretty soon the stitches could come out. “And then what?” Loki had asked.

Strange had shrugged. “Then you can go.”

It had filled him with relief, hearing that. Not because he’d thought he couldn’t get out of here if he’d really wanted to, even if Strange and Wong really *hadn’t* wanted him to, but because he’d surprised himself by not wanting to have to hurt them to do it. Strange had saved his life, after all. The two of them seemed like decent men. More decent than Loki was himself, certainly.

The Sanctum was empty, though. Loki stood on the landing to the second floor, looking down to the first, then towards the staircase to the third. No, he didn't know how long they'd be gone. Best to just go downstairs. Besides, there were books in the study down there, and he knew Wong didn't want him looking at them. Someone not wanting him to do something had always been reason enough to do it.

He made himself a cup of tea in the kitchen, then went into the study, conjured a fire in the fireplace, and pulled several books off the shelf before settling in one of the armchairs in the room, curling his legs underneath him. Thor had always said he didn't understand how Loki could sit like that. If Loki had been feeling nice, he would respond with something like, "Just my natural grace." If he hadn't, it would have been more along the lines of, "One of a long list of things you don't understand."

His chest ached, and it wasn't from the wound. Fine. *Stop thinking about Thor.* He forced himself to concentrate on the book instead, sneezing as he opened it and a cloud of dust flew up.

The magical theory in the book was interesting. He wondered if he could perform magic this way, though there was no reason to, besides curiosity. The basics weren't in there, of course, but Loki could glean them based on what he was reading. Strange's order drew power from other dimensions to perform magic. There was nothing innately special about any of them—*any* human could do this. Which meant Loki could too, if he wanted to.

Loki's power, on the other hand, came from within him. It was a talent, something unique to him. These mortals could never reproduce it.

There was a sound from upstairs, a creak, then a door closing. Loki didn't look up from his book, not until there were footsteps on the stairs. That was Strange's tread, not Wong's. After a moment, Strange appeared in the doorway. He glanced at the fire, then at Loki, then folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorframe. "How's the tea?" he asked.

Loki raised an eyebrow, picked up the cup, and took a sip. "Cold, now," he said. "And sub-par, compared to the stuff grown on Vanaheim."

Strange's mouth quirked upwards in a smile. "You know that's Da Hong Pao tea," he said.

Mildly, Loki asked, "Should that mean something to me?"

It looked like Strange was trying not to laugh, but something about his wry amusement was infectious, and Loki couldn't help but smile back.

"Anyway, feeling better?" Strange asked.

There was a note to the question that wiped away any moment they'd been sharing and instantly put Loki on edge. Absently, he put his fingers to the mostly healed wound on his chest and replied, "I suppose I should say thank you?"

Strange shrugged and didn't move from the doorway. "Thank Christine. She's the one that saved your life." There was a silence and Loki waited for some kind of explanation as to whom Christine was, or why he should care, beyond the fact that she was apparently responsible for his surgery. But Strange didn't elaborate, instead coming in and sitting in the armchair opposite Loki. "Since you seem more or less recovered, let's talk."

Loki's hackles went up. He felt like a cornered animal suddenly. Or maybe he always felt like a cornered animal, but he'd allowed himself to relax a little bit in this house, and now he was

remembering what normal felt like. Strange and Wong hadn't seemed to mean him any harm, besides some verbal sniping from the librarian, of course. But Loki could give as good as he got in that arena. "Talk about what?" he asked warily.

Leaning back in the chair, Strange said. "Where you were."

"I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific. I get around."

Strange chuckled. "Yeah. That's kind of the point. Look, I keep a watch list of beings that might pose a threat to Earth. You're on it."

"What an honor," Loki said, the beginnings of a sneer in his voice.

Ignoring this, Strange went on, "The Masters of the Mystic Arts have been watching you since New York, though. I went back through their records to see what you'd been up to between 2012 and when you showed up again, and I'm going to be honest with you, I need your help to make sense of it."

Loki's laughter was quiet. "Why should I help you with that?"

"I helped you."

Pausing to regard Strange, Loki eventually said, "Ah. I see what this is."

Strange held his hands up and the tremor caught Loki's eye again. "It's not. I told you, I mean you no harm."

"Actually," Loki said, "I don't think you *have* told me that."

There was a silence. Then, Strange said, "Haven't I? Well, I don't. You're safe here. At least, you're as safe as we are."

It bothered Loki that Strange seemed to know that *safe* was something Loki hadn't felt in a long time. He'd only caught fleeting glimpses of it for years—when Thor and him had sat together and not fought and been a family; when his brother had wrapped him up in those absurd, encompassing hugs of his.

"I'm not sure how comforting I should find that," Loki said. Strange smiled but didn't answer. That actually made it *less* comforting. The universe was a dangerous place and Loki seemed to have a way of attracting trouble. Perhaps courting trouble was the better word. He *was* the God of Mischief, after all.

Glancing into the fireplace, Loki finally replied, "I was on the run. I can't tell you everywhere I stopped because I don't remember." He hesitated then, because this wasn't exactly true. But he certainly wasn't going to talk about the wretched TVA.

Strange drew a circle with his hand and an orange portal opened up next to him. Another shimmered into existence in front of the fireplace, and he picked up a fire poker next to his chair, putting it through the portal. Loki watched as it emerged from the portal spinning in front of the fire. Parlor tricks. Strange had style, though. Withdrawing the fire poker and closing the portal, Strange met Loki's eyes and said, "We wouldn't have lost you if you'd just used the Tesseract to move around Earth. Did you leave the planet?"

So. Strange knew Loki had stolen the Tesseract from under the Avengers' noses. Not surprising, he supposed. The Masters of the Mystic Arts so far seemed more competent than the Avengers had

ever been.

“A few times,” Loki said. Strange was looking at him expectantly. Loki thought of his brother, and the trust, and what they’d rebuilt before—

He took a breath. The truth. “I was time traveling,” he said. Then, he sighed and added, “With this.”

Holding out a hand in front of himself, he watched as the Tesseract materialized on his palm. Its blue glow cast the room in light that didn’t seem real, somehow, like it didn’t belong on this world. It probably didn’t. The Tesseract was more than any one planet could contain.



Strange’s eyes were locked on it. There was a weird feeling in the air in the room, suddenly. Weird as in Wyrd, as in Norns and something beyond understanding, a buzz of magic and power that thrummed deep in Loki’s core. He’d felt it twice before: when he’d teleported from The Sanctuary to SHIELD’s facility in New Mexico and encountered the Tesseract, and in the makeshift lab that Barton had set up for Selvig to study the cube. But he knew it wasn’t the Tesseract that caused it, because he’d been carrying it around for years now. And besides, he’d seen it in the weapons vault when he’d been a child, and he’d felt nothing then, either.

He’d had time to think about it, though. And what he’d thought had caused it had been the gem in his scepter being in the presence of the Tesseract. Which meant that either that gem was here, or there was something in *this* room that was similar to it.

Loki’s eyes were drawn inexplicably to the amulet around Strange’s neck. It could have been anything—the Sanctum was full, after all, of magical objects of power. But something about that amulet made him stare and wonder.

“So,” Strange said, leaning forward. “You still have it.”

Loki lowered his arm and put both his hands on the Tesseract, resting his thumbs on two of its corners. “It seems like the sort of thing one should be careful not to misplace.”

Could Strange feel the energy in the room? If he could, he wasn’t showing it. But Loki didn’t think

he could. He was still staring at the Tesseract, but finally, he met Loki's eyes. "I'm not exactly an expert on that thing, but I was under the impression it allowed you to open a portal through space, not time."

With a half-smile, Loki said, "You're not wrong."

"So..." Strange paused, as though he was expecting Loki to volunteer information without a direct question being asked. When Loki just raised his eyebrows, the other man finished, "How did you time travel with that if it should have just moved you through space?"

It wasn't just time and space. The Tesseract had brought him to different dimensions, too. But maybe that went without saying.

Loki turned the Tesseract over in his hands. The cube had never exactly been a comfortable fit in his palm. Instinctively, he'd always known that he held it because the Tesseract *allowed* him to hold it. When it tired of him, he didn't know what would happen. Why it had begun transporting him through time would always be a mystery. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "I suppose because space and time really aren't separate from each other."

There was a thoughtful expression on Strange's face, but all he said was, "You have a point."

Balancing the Tesseract on his leg, Loki leaned back in the chair, feeling the muscles in his thighs stretch. He'd spent too much time lying around. Even a Jotun could get out of shape. The question Strange wasn't asking, probably because he didn't know to ask, was: why hadn't he done what he'd promised to do, and delivered the Tesseract to Thanos?

With the clarity of hindsight, it was easy to say: because Thanos had been a madman, hell bent on wiping out half the life in the universe. Bringing *balance*; it would be a funny joke, but Loki didn't think the Mad Titan would know a joke if it threw his precious Tesseract right in his face. Or maybe he'd betrayed Thanos because Thor's words had gotten through to him. It wasn't too late to stop what he'd started. In his brother's eyes, redemption was never out of reach.

At the time, it had really just been because he wanted the Tesseract. And because he hadn't been thinking that clearly.

Folding his hands in his lap, Strange said, "What made you come back here? You're risking capture every day."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "So you're still maintaining that *this* isn't me being captured?"

"I'll let you know if I change my mind," Strange said.

"Mm." Loki watched the Tesseract glow. It wasn't that he didn't understand why Strange would ask this question, but he was fooling himself if he thought Loki was going to answer. The man was a stranger. A stranger who'd saved his life, perhaps, but a stranger, nonetheless, who was unlikely to become anything more. "A mystery for you to ponder, Doctor Strange."

Smiling sardonically, Strange said, "I have to warn you, I don't back down from a challenge."

Loki furrowed his brow and didn't respond. Then, he chuckled. "I don't understand you."

The same smile, tinged with amusement this time. "And that bothers you."

Picking up the Tesseract and vanishing it again, Loki said, "Not really." He hesitated. Though he liked to think of himself as someone who always chose the right words, he had a feeling he was

about to say exactly the wrong thing. Still, he added, “But I *am* intrigued.”

Strange’s smile didn’t budge, and he said, “So, I—”

But then, an explosion shook the house. Loki started and grabbed the arms of the chair, but Strange was on his feet instantly. He rushed from the room without saying anything. Loki remained where he was, then followed Strange. It was only once he was on the stairs headed for the third floor that he wondered what his plan was. Was he going to help Strange or just watch as something undoubtedly horrible tried to kill him?

So much for being safe in this house.

There was a flapping sound behind him and Loki instinctively ducked. Something hurtled over his head and he looked up in time to see a red cloak flying through the air of its own volition, which then settled around Strange’s shoulders.

Interesting.

He arrived in the room with the three doors seconds after Strange. One of the doors was blasted open, hanging by its hinges. *Something* was trying to come through, but Strange was keeping it at bay, his hands moving in a series of complex gestures while orange symbols materialized in the air in front of the door, spinning and seeming to build upon themselves to keep the opening sealed.

Loki could feel power thrumming in the air. And he could also feel something dark, wrong, *off*, pouring through that door, that set his teeth on edge. He recognized it. With a hiss of air, he flicked his wrists and his daggers appeared in his hands. Well, there was *that* decision made. He supposed the sweatpants would give him a certain freedom of movement that he wasn’t really used to in battle, too.

There was another explosion behind the door and plaster dust rained down from the ceiling onto their heads. Strange’s hands stopped moving and he held them outstretched in front of him, his palms out, both of them trembling.

For a long, breathless moment, the two of them stood there. There was quiet on the other side of the door, but the wrongness was still there, digging at Loki’s senses. It felt like something was trying to scoop out his brain from the inside out.

Then, something slammed into the network of orange symbols rotating over the door, squealing in rage or pain or some combination thereof. Loki’s eyes narrowed and he shifted his daggers in his hands. The soft spot on the other side of the door was bleeding horror. If there was no one there to seal it, the best thing to do was retreat and give this place up as lost.

Loki had a feeling Strange wasn’t going to do that.

The orange symbols flickered and a hand passed through them, scrabbling at the door frame. Raised, blackened veins ran up the arm it was attached to.

Something hit the symbols again with another piercing squeal, and sparks flew off them. The symbols bulged outward into the room and Loki felt the spells weakening. Any moment now, they’d fail, and whatever was behind those symbols would come screaming into the room with one purpose: kill everything in sight. He shifted on his bare feet and drew in a breath. Let the fuckers try it.

There was a buzz and the lights flashed off in the room, then back on, as Strange tried to maintain his protective spells against what was behind them. The symbols were stretching as more veiny

hands scrabbled around the edges of the door. It suddenly occurred to Loki that he wasn't sure whether his magic had entirely recovered. Oh well, no time like the present to find out.

And then, with a crack, the spells failed.

Strange gasped and stumbled back, looking like he'd been walloped in the gut, but before he could fall to the ground, the cloak caught him and pulled him to his feet. It gave him enough time to raise his hands and create a rope made of crackling orange energy, which he raised in time to block the creature that had been first through the door.

Loki raised his knives in front of his face and crossed them, summoning a ball of energy and shooting it at the creature charging him. The energy struck it in the face and it screamed, then dropped. The things were jamming up the door, trying to get through all at once, and Loki caught a glimpse of glassy black eyes, black veins crawling up the creatures' necks, across their faces, and into those eyes.

The doorframe cracked and the things spilled into the room. Orange discs appeared on Strange's hands and he flung blasts of magic at the creatures. Loki hit two more with balls of energy from his blades, then ducked aside, leaving an illusion of himself where he'd been standing. When one of the creatures came for the illusion, he stepped up alongside it and cut its throat, then shoved it into the one that was right behind it.

Black blood poured from the thing's throat and the one behind it screamed in rage. Loki very much doubted it was related to the death of its fellow. He stepped forward, ducked a swinging hand—he'd seen firsthand the damage those long, dirty fingernails could do—and funneled magic through the knife in his right hand, so that as he slit the creature open from belly to sternum, the magic cut through what the blade couldn't.

More blood gushed to the floor and Loki whirled away, glancing over to Strange. The red cloak that he wore flew off his shoulders and wrapped itself around the neck of one of the creatures which had gotten too close, pulling it away and strangling it. Loki flicked his eyes away in time to sidestep one of the creatures leaping for him. It turned its head, its jaw gaping wide, unhinging, and Loki bared his teeth and swung a fist at it, feeling bone crack against the side of his hand. The force of the blow made him twist on the ball of his foot to maintain his balance, but between the blood slicking the floor and his bare feet, he slipped, thrown off his equilibrium for a moment too long.

Bright orange light flared at his side and he spun in time to see one of the things go down, too close to him for comfort, symbols crawling over it while it writhed. He glanced over his shoulder, met Strange's eyes, and nodded once in thanks.

Then three more of the creatures were running at him and he stopped thinking. The fight became a blur of black blood, spinning blades, and magic, Loki's white and green, and Strange's orange, sparking and crackling in the air. The cloak, considering it was an article of clothing, really held its own, at one point draping itself over the face of a creature that had gotten hold of Loki by the shoulders, and then dragging it back so that Loki had enough space to swing his arm under and up, stabbing the thing in the heart.

There was another explosion from beyond the door, and then orange magic lit the space beyond it. The same symbols that Strange had summoned went whirling towards the door from the other side. But Loki couldn't watch, because a creature was in his face. He spun, kicking its feet out from underneath it, and jammed a blade in its eye.

Before he was able to get his feet under him again, something grabbed him around the neck and

picked him up off the ground. He lashed out with a dagger but didn't connect with anything, and within a second, he was dropped back to his feet next to Strange.

The cloak pulled itself from Loki's shoulders and settled itself back around Strange's. He gave it a disgruntled look and said, "He didn't need to *wear* you for you to get him over here." The cloak rippled, and Strange looked at Loki, then said, "Cover me, would you?"

"While you do what?" Loki asked, but he flipped his knives out so they were ready and took a step forward to stand in front of Strange. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Strange making a different series of motions with his hands. A green glow emanated from him. Loki dodged a creature and grabbed it from behind, slitting its throat. As he looked up, he caught a glimpse of Strange, his fingers held in front of his midsection and the amulet around his neck open. The green glow was coming from there. It looked like an open eye, shining bright green.

Green roundels appeared in the air in front of him while a ring of green encircled his arm. With a look of intense concentration on his face, he grabbed at the air in front of him and began twisting his hand in a counter clockwise direction. Loki flung a dagger at one of the creatures and blood fountained from its throat where the blade hit it. In the same motion, he spun, sinking his remaining knife into the gut of a creature that had come at his back. The cloak rippled through the air again and dragged the thing away from Loki.

This gave him an unobstructed view of what Strange was doing. The door, which had barely been hanging on the wall, slowly lifted. Pieces of wood that had splintered from the door frame with the force of the explosion came up off the floor, flying back into place. Then, faster, the door straightened itself out, before it settled into the correct position, completely repaired, and swung shut.

Loki threw his remaining dagger at the only creature left in the room, and it died with a scream, then a gurgle, the blade embedded in its throat.

Then there was silence. Sudden, startling silence, as though nothing had ever happened. It was always this way after a battle, and it took Loki by surprise every time. It never seemed right that the violence of battle could just *stop*, that all the blood and adrenaline could keep flowing, but with nowhere to go. And yet it did, to the point that looking down and seeing the room strewn with bodies was almost a shock.

Neither of them spoke, both of them breathing heavily, ready for something else to come through the door. Finally, though, Strange said, "I think they sealed it." He straightened up and tugged at his clothes, which were looking a little rumpled.

No need to clarify what 'it' was. A soft spot between dimensions had opened up behind the door. Loki didn't relax, keeping his knives out and holding himself with his knees bent, ready to fight again. "That door didn't keep them out the first time. I imagine we'll find out soon enough if the soft spot's been sealed."

The two of them lapsed back into silence. But as the minutes passed and further attack didn't come, Loki let his arms drop to his sides, though he still didn't put his daggers away. For the first time, he noticed that his sweatpants were soaked in black blood. The bottom hems were dragging on the floor because of the extra weight, leaving feathery smears across the wood.

Gesturing with one of his knives, he asked, "What did you do, and *what*—" He aimed the point of his blade towards the amulet around Strange's neck, "*—is that?*"

With a smile, almost a smirk, Strange said, "I fixed the door. And this?" He made another series of

motions with his hands and the amulet shuttered closed, cutting off the green glow. “This is the Eye of Agamotto.”

“That tells me nothing.”

“You don’t say.”

Loki made an exasperated noise. “I just fought with you to keep these things from invading *your* Sanctum, and that’s all I get?”

With a shrug, Strange said, “Yeah. Oh, sorry.” Another smirk flashed across his face. “Thanks for the help. It went a lot quicker with two people.”

Snorting, Loki said, “You’re quite welcome.” He looked down. One of the creatures lay at his feet. His face expressionless, he toed the thing, then got a foot under its shoulder and rolled it over onto its back.

Kree. This time. Ultimus wasn’t picky about who he dragged to the dimension that he’d taken over as his own, but his own people had borne the brunt of it. In death, the creature was somehow less grotesque and more pitiful. Its black eyes were wide and staring, no whites visible at all. Loki would guess the eyeball was black all the way around. Even the eyelid around it was blackened by the crawling veins that ran up its neck and face. A trickle of tarry blood was running from its gaping lips. It still had a mouthful of teeth though, some of them unnaturally sharp. Its lips were ripped open as though it had been biting them. The look on its face was crazed. Tormented. Sometimes Loki wondered if these twisted creatures were running to attack on Ultimus’s orders, or just running.

Loki had to suppress a shudder. He’d been there. He didn’t care to go back. Enough time in that place and he would have ended up just like these creatures—blood running black, heart turned to tar, mind gone. Grist for Ultimus’s army. Meat to be thrown at anyone brave and stupid enough to stand up to him. These were just advance guards, Loki knew that. Once Ultimus figured out how to tear open a large enough hole between dimensions, he’d send everything he had. And Loki didn’t want to think about what he might have, decanting under that hard black star.

Grimacing, he went to retrieve his knives, wiping the blood off on his shirt. Everything needed to be washed, anyway. What was a little more blood? He could feel splatters of it drying on his face.

Strange was watching Loki as he picked his way back across the room. There was a thoughtful look on his face, and perhaps a little surprise. When Loki met his eyes, Strange smiled slightly and said, “So. Welcome to the club, I guess. You want to help save the universe?”

Loki sheathed his daggers and smiled grimly. “When do we start?”

Chapter 4

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



Later, when they'd cleaned up the room, and then themselves, after Loki had learned how to use the washing machine and eaten dinner that Wong brought from Hong Kong, he asked Strange to tell him more.

It was dark outside, but a fire was burning in the study. Loki watched the flicker of light and shadow on Strange's face as he explained about the Masters of the Mystic Arts, the other Sanctums, Kamar-Taj. The fight against Ultimus that had spread the order thin. The Sorcerer Supreme, who had been killed, and whom Strange clearly missed. How her death had accelerated something that had already begun, but which none of them had known about yet. Strange's friend, Mordo, who had vanished, and who Strange worried about.

"Do you think he's fallen in with Ultimus?" Loki asked.

"I don't know," Strange said pensively. "I thought he was smarter than that."

"Well." Loki snorted. "Smart people do stupid things." He was talking about himself, but from the look Strange shot him, he knew that this truism could apply just as well to the other man.

The fire popped and Loki glanced at it, then back to Strange as he said, "We've been trying to find a way to bottle Ultimus up in his dimension, but nothing works. It's like this universe is..." He hesitated, waved a hand in the air, then finally finished, "Like it's built on shaky foundations. Too many cracks in the walls."

The Tesseract nudged at Loki's awareness. "Mm," he said noncommittally. He knew all about shaky foundations. His entire life had been built on them. Asgard itself had been built on them. A golden lie. And for what?

He pushed that particular blackness back. "So you're losing."

"I didn't say that," Strange said.

With an acerbic smile, Loki said, "Most people don't."

There was a long silence. No argument from Strange. Whether that was because Loki had hit a nerve or because Strange just didn't feel it was worth his time to argue was anyone's guess. Well, not anyone's. Just his, he supposed, as Wong had gone to bed an hour ago, after coming in to provide several addenda to Strange's explanation about Kaecilius and his Zealots.

Strange rubbed a finger over his goatee, looking at Loki thoughtfully, and then asked, "You haven't mentioned being in pain."

"No," Loki said, furrowing his brow. "Why would I?"

Gesturing towards Loki's chest, he said, "The way you fought today, that would have reopened a wound like what you have. I've been watching you, though. You're not bleeding."

Ah. So that was why Strange had loaned him the white t-shirt. With a shrug, Loki said, "I'm a god. We heal fast."

"Clearly." Strange pushed himself to his feet. "Can I take a look?"

Loki cocked his head, looking at Strange, then shrugged again and pulled the t-shirt over his head. He felt slovenly wearing these Midgardian clothes, but his own wardrobe was still down for the count. As Strange drew closer and studied the sutures, Loki held still, watching the fire burn, trying not to think about how he'd ended up with them in the first place. The memory nudged at him, its outlines clearer all the time, but he kept pushing it away.

"I think these are ready to come out," Strange said critically. "Hold on—" There was a breath of inrushing air as he vanished, and then, a few moments later, reappeared holding a box and a folding chair. He opened the box and pulled out tweezers and a pair of scissors, then put the chair next to Loki's and sat down.

With an amount of alarm that he didn't think was outsize compared to the tremor in Strange's hands, he said, "Er, *you're* not going to take them out, are you?"

Strange gave him a look that managed to be knowing, disgruntled, and accepting all at once. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and slowly, his hands stopped shaking.

Loki stared. "How did you do that?"

"Kind of a stupid question, don't you think?" Strange asked, using the tweezers to pull up on the first black suture holding Loki's skin together, then snipping it. Gently, he pulled it out, dropping it on his knee.

With a chuckle, Loki said, "Fine. Fair enough." Even though he'd seen the shaking vanish with his own eyes, he still didn't really want to watch the sutures come out. Strange could barely write his own name; letting him wield a sharp object millimeters from skin seemed ill-advised. "If I ask the right question, do I get an answer?" Strange's gaze flicked up to him but he didn't say anything. Loki took that as a maybe. *So ask the right question.* "If you can use your magic to control that, why don't you?"

Cutting another thread, Strange said, "Because I made a choice."

"Your hands or magic."

He snipped a thread and paused, touching the spot with his fingers. Loki could feel them on the grafted skin. The feeling was coming back. With a nod to himself, Strange worked the thread out. Continuing with the sutures, he said, “My career or a different way to help people.”

There were a whole series of right questions to ask, here. Loki didn’t really know why he was interested, but something about Strange really *did* intrigue him. It was partly the sorcery, partly his obviously keen intelligence, partly the fact that he, too, seemed to wear a mask. Even if Loki wouldn’t drop his, he enjoyed getting others to remove theirs.

“You were a neurosurgeon before, weren’t you?” Loki asked. When Strange glanced up at him, Loki had to stop himself from shrugging. Sharp object, delicate skin. Instead, he just quirked an eyebrow. “I’ve had a lot of time to look at your library.”

“Good detective work,” Strange said, snipping the next suture.

With a smirk, Loki said, “Thanks.” He paused, then said, “And then...what? Your hands. What happened?”

Strange cut the last suture and carefully removed the stitch. Then, he leaned back and looked critically at the graft. Loki looked down too. There was a circular, mostly healed wound there—an almost scar—and fading red marks where the sutures had been. “Good as new,” Strange said.

Loki touched his chest, running his fingers over the line between the graft and his own skin. “I’m afraid there’s no surgery that can accomplish *that* for me,” he said. It came out much sadder than he’d intended it to, when he’d meant it to be biting and self-deprecating.

There was a silence, broken only by the quiet metal clink of Strange putting the scissors and tweezers back in the case they’d come from. “It was a car accident,” he said, surprising Loki. His hands were shaking again. “Distracted driving. Number one contributing factor of motor vehicle crashes in New York state.” With a small, mirthless smile, he added, “I’m lucky to be alive, actually. It took me a long time to figure that out.”

Loki met his eyes from under lowered brows. Now *there* was a feeling he didn’t understand. Lucky to be alive? Every time he’d escaped death, it only seemed to be because life had something worse in store for him. He waited for Strange to tell them that they were alike in this way, both lucky to be alive, but he didn’t.

Instead, Strange leaned back in the chair, folding his hands in his lap. Not going anywhere. What was happening? Loki’s eyes shifted towards the door before he remembered this man had saved his life, and that not twelve hours ago, Loki had made the choice to fight at his side. There was no need to escape. But the way Strange was sitting there, it was like...like a friend might. “You can hear the whole story,” he said. “If you want. It’s mostly me wasting time on the wrong things and pushing everyone away. You know, pretty standard arrogant-genius-hits-rock-bottom stuff.”

“Ah. Of course you’re a genius, why should that surprise me?”

“I thought you might argue about the ‘arrogant’ part.”

A smile twitched at Loki’s mouth. “Oh no, Doctor, I’m afraid there’s no disputing *that*. Though, I have to admit, in your case, it seems somewhat justified.”

Strange looked surprised to hear this. Loki was a little surprised to have said it, quite honestly. He wasn’t free with his compliments, even backhanded ones. If he was, it was a dead giveaway that he wasn’t being sincere. But he meant this. Signs of the man’s accomplishments and intellect were

everywhere if one was observant. He'd let slip himself that he hadn't been a wizard during the Battle of New York. That had only been six years ago, and yet here he was, Guardian of the New York Sanctum, Master of the Mystic Arts, protector of the Eye of Agamotto, whatever it was. Loki knew only what Strange had told him about his order, but it seemed to him that one didn't achieve what he had without being quite smart and quite talented.

Maybe he shouldn't have acknowledged it out loud, though.

Loki reached for the t-shirt to pull it back on. Was it his imagination, or had Strange's gaze lingered on his bare chest a fraction of a second longer than necessary?

Imagination. Strange was wiping the scissors and tweezers with a cotton swab he'd dabbed with alcohol, looking as cool as he always did. Loki had to sneer at himself for that. As though he had a relationship with this man where he could think things like 'as he always did?' Still, a few days ago, he'd been itching to leave. Now he seemed to have signed himself up to something that resembled a commitment. Loki didn't like commitments. But the itch to run hadn't reappeared yet.

"I imagine I can continue to sleep in my room?" Loki asked. "Since I don't appear to be leaving just yet."

"*Your* room?" Strange said. "Pretty presumptuous, there."

"Yes, well, I'm afraid you'll have to get used to it, if we're going to be working together." Loki arched an eyebrow. "So?"

Strange chuckled. "Unless you want to move up to the room in the attic, yeah. It's all yours." He closed the medical case and latched it, his tremor making it difficult. Loki almost reached out to help him, but stopped himself. "And I wouldn't recommend the room in the attic. I'm pretty sure every previous Guardian has used it as storage and forgotten what they put up there."

"I thought you told me the last Guardian was killed," Loki pointed out. "So they wouldn't have an opportunity to move anything."

Making a face, Strange said, "Good point."

Loki watched him. Then, glancing at the fire, burned down to almost nothing, he said, "Maybe you'll tell me about that thing around your neck once you trust me."

Raising his eyebrows, Strange said, "You're the God of Mischief. Does anyone trust you?"

My brother did.

Stop it.

My brother does.

You're a liar, Loki of Nothing and Nowhere.

Loki gave Strange the smile that made people distrust him and simultaneously desperately *want* to trust him. "Maybe you'll be the first on the list, Doctor Strange."

That got a quiet laugh. "Maybe." Strange got to his feet and glanced at the fire. Then, he yawned, stretched, and said, "I'm going to bed. See you tomorrow." He headed for the door, but stopped when he got there and turned back. "And Loki," he said. Loki looked up at him and Strange finished, "Call me Stephen."

Loki inclined his head and watched the other man leave. When he heard a door close upstairs, he flicked his fingers. The fire went out and he got to his feet too, running the fingernails of one hand along the palm of the other. He hadn't been able to stand against Ultimus when he'd had Thor with him. Why did he think it was going to be any different with Strange, Wong, and however many other wizards they had spread out across the world? If the God of Thunder couldn't stop Ultimus, what hope did humans have?

Why had he committed himself to yet another hopeless cause?

Chapter 5

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



"Because that's what heroes do."

"Well, it's a good thing I'm not a hero, then," Loki retorts.

Speaking of hopeless causes.

Loki's relationship with his brother has always been the ultimate hopeless cause, for whatever reason under the sun—any sun, you could take your pick—one could think of. For forever, Loki has wanted to be Thor, and for almost as long, he's hated Thor (this part is a lie). Now Thor is trying to convince him to make a stand. To fight, when there's not a chance in hell they can win. Loki's been having this argument with himself for years and somehow he's lost it every time. He is, he supposes, his own worst enemy.

But arguing against Thor is even worse, because Loki has never won an argument against Thor, not once in his whole life. It doesn't help that Thor's right. It doesn't help that Loki's been doing exactly what Thor is saying they should be doing, and he's been doing it for awhile.

"Just because you refuse to call yourself something doesn't make it so," Thor replies.

Damn his brother for being capable of this kind of insight. Loki prefers thinking of him as an idiot who sees punching his way out as the solution to everything. It's irritating when he demonstrates there's more to him.

"There's no point in staying here," Loki says. "We're going to get ourselves killed."

"Then we get ourselves killed," Thor says with a shrug. "I won't abandon Earth."

Loki rolls his eyes so far that he's honestly surprised they don't fall out the back of his head. "You

may not mind dying, but I'd rather not be shuffled loose from the mortal coil just yet, if it's all the same to you."

Grunting in thinly disguised incredulity, Thor says, "You really think all this is going to stay on Earth?"

"No. But I'll live longer if I don't stay on Earth, either." To prove his point, Loki grabs Thor's arm and yanks it up, bringing into view the angry red gouges on his bicep. Four deep lines, swollen, inflamed, and leaking pus. Today the pus turned black. Thor jerks his arm away, but Loki glares at him and repeats, "We're going to get ourselves killed."

Thor rubs at his arm and Loki resists the urge to snap at him to stop, he's only going to make it worse. In another day or two, it's going to be bad enough that Loki will have to start insisting they find someone who can help, even though he has no idea who that might be. Somehow he thinks the doctors at Metro-General won't be able to treat this.

His stomach twists. He doesn't know what he'll do if something happens to Thor.

Loki woke up, his eyes opening to stare at the ceiling.

The image of Thor's wound took a minute to fade, and restlessly, he swung his legs out of bed to go stare out the window. The pigeons were back, cooing softly. Loki wrapped his fingers around the windowsill and drew in a deep breath, digging his nails into the grain of the wood, and listened to them. As a child, he'd gone to the palace dovecote and sat for hours, surrounded by the sound of fluttering wings and gentle coos. His mother had not been impressed by the unhygienic nature of this. His father had grumbled once that if he was going to spend so much time around birds, he should go to the aviary with the ravens.

Loki had put a dove in Thor's hand once, and Thor had been gentle with it, even though he'd been afraid he was going to hurt it.

The thought made Loki's chest and throat tighten.

He needed to think about something else.

Walling the traitorous part of his mind off, he turned around. His eyes fell on the chair where his torn and bloody clothes had been sitting for a week, and he noticed that they weren't there anymore. The closet door was open though, and his overcoat and leathers were hanging there, looking pristine.

His eyes narrowed. Had someone come into his room while he slept, or had he just not noticed the change until now? When he'd come to bed last night, he hadn't been paying much attention. He hadn't paid much attention the last several nights, to be honest. Curiosity got the better of him and he went to inspect his clothes, which were clean and repaired.

For the first time in he didn't know how long, something like happiness brightened in him. Quickly, he got dressed. Did he feel more like himself in his own clothes? Maybe not, considering his grasp on his sense of self was shaky at the best of times. But he didn't feel like a slob anymore, at least.

So now that he'd joined a worldwide network of sorcerers as—what, a consultant?—he wondered what that entailed. Strange and Wong left the Sanctum every day, but Strange hadn't told Loki the previous night what they were doing or where they went. He let himself out of his room and went downstairs to the kitchen to see if either of them was in the house.

Wong was there, holding a book up to his nose while he absently stirred at a cup of tea. His eyes appeared over the top of the book as Loki came in, but he didn't say anything. It had been impossible to tell how he'd felt last night about the fact that Strange was sharing so much with Loki—at first, he'd seemed to have only trepidation for the whole thing, but then he'd volunteered some information himself by the end. Maybe a prerequisite for being a Master of the Mystic Arts was a capability to keep one's emotions entirely on lockdown.

When Wong continued to stand there reading, Loki said, "So. You use magic to repair clothing?"

From behind the book, Wong said, "No."

Loki waited, but nothing more was forthcoming. He opened a cupboard and peered inside. Oatmeal, cereal, a half-eaten coffeecake. None of it looked appetizing. Maybe he'd get used to Midgardian food someday, but it hadn't happened yet. "Perhaps it's a stupid question, but how did my clothes go from destroyed to, well, not?"

Wong lowered the book. "Stephen brought them to the dry cleaners on the next block, and then the tailor."

Loki didn't know how to react to this. Obviously, he'd been a prince. Still technically *was* a prince, though it was meaningless now. So he was used to people doing things for him. On Asgard, a mere ten years ago, he never would have laid eyes on his blood-stained and destroyed clothing once he'd taken it off. It would have been whisked away to be cleaned and repaired, or, barring that, simply replaced. But the palace servants did that because they had to, because it was their job.

Even if Loki wasn't crystal clear on what exactly Stephen Strange's job was, he was *just* well-adjusted enough to recognize that it wasn't doing anything for Loki because he felt he had to.

Which meant...he'd done it to be nice?

"Well," he said. "In any case, I appreciate it."

No response. Loki pursed his lips and turned to leave, but then Wong said to his back, "Stephen wants to know if you'll come with the two of us today to take care of something." He paused, then added, "Actually, Stephen more or less told me to tell you to come, but I said that was rude."

Turning back around slowly, Loki repeated, "Take care of something? That's a bit vague for my tastes. Besides, isn't that what the two of you do? 'Take care' of things?"

"I also told him you'd probably say that."

Wong finally put the book down and looked at Loki, who gave one mirthless exhale of laughter. "I'm quite sure you don't know me well enough to hazard any kind of guess at what I may or may not say, Master Wong."

With a shrug, Wong said, "I guessed right, though. I know your type well enough."

Loki narrowed his eyes at him. "I'm a prince. I'm a *god*. There's no 'type.'"

It was more a suggestion of a smile than an actual smile on Wong's face—Loki still hadn't actually seen him smile for real. But his tone was as hard to read as ever as he said, "Before I came here, I was at Kamar-Taj for decades. I'm quite used to very smart, very powerful, very stubborn people."

At another time in his life, Loki would have taken offense at this. To be compared to human

wizards—intolerable. But he didn't have the strength for it these days. His anger for trivialities burned itself out too quickly.

So, fine. Wong found him predictable. It was insulting, but perhaps he'd look at it as an opportunity for growth. Surely there were still things he could do that would shock humans. Then again, it was getting harder to shock people, considering what they were seeing on close to a daily basis.

Loki folded his arms over his chest. "What does Strange want my help with? And why?"

After taking a sip of his tea, Wong said, "What: a dimensional protuberance. As for why, I assume it has something to do with the fact that you put your life on the line to protect this Sanctum yesterday."

"I put my life on the line to protect *myself*," Loki corrected him. His expression darkened. "I know full well what those things are capable of."

He wasn't sure what he was doing. These people showed the barest amount of trust in him and he bit back like a beaten dog. Possibly a more apt analogy than he thought, actually. For all he knew, he *was* a mongrel. No one had ever seen fit to inform him who his biological mother was.

Strange and Wong would realize, likely sooner than later, that trusting him was a curse. If he didn't turn on you himself, the Norns would see to it that he might as well have. There was no reward for trusting him. No good came of it.

Smiling like an animal stalking prey, Loki said, "The point is, I wouldn't put much stock in the fact that I helped you."

"Well." Wong just looked at him. "It doesn't really matter why you did it. You did it and now you're useful. This is the world we live in. We must all get used to it." As Wong finished his tea serenely, Loki felt the surprise on his face. Had he himself said something like that on Asgard, he probably would have ended up with Hogun and Sif pointing swords at him. 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend' hadn't ever really included him.

Loki absently rubbed a finger along the gold half-circle set into his leathers. Part of him wanted to ask if this was a trick, but frankly, Wong didn't seem like the tricking sort. A straight-shooter, as they said. And Strange had had ample opportunity to hurt or incapacitate him if he'd wanted to. He'd done the opposite. They both seemed genuinely willing to give Loki a chance, and Strange seemed to...

No. That was stupid.

Oh, fine. Strange seemed to enjoy his company. Mystifyingly, it was worth adding. Loki hadn't been good company in some time.

"Alright," he finally said. "I'll come along."

Wong nodded and said, "Good. Let's go."

"What—now?" Loki asked, surprised.

"Dimensional protuberances don't just close themselves." Opening a cupboard and grabbing a couple granola bars, Wong stuffed one into Loki's hand and said, "I'm supposed to tell you to eat something, too." Then, he held one hand out in front of him, palm out, and circled the other. A portal opened up, through which Loki could see the sterile hallway of—a hospital? "After you,"

Wong said. “They’re expecting us.”

Loki looked at him, his brow furrowing, and then he stepped through the portal.

There was an area cordoned off around the dimensional protuberance, but doctors and nurses were still hanging around outside it. Wong’s and Loki’s arrival didn’t faze them, but then, considering the sorts of things they probably saw regularly, that perhaps wasn’t a surprise. Strange was inside the cordon, standing with one arm crossed over his midsection and a hand on his chin.

There was energy absolutely *pouring* out of the protuberance—what Loki simply referred to as a soft spot—and it made his teeth ache and feel like they were going to fall out of his jaw. It was like nails on a chalkboard given physical sensation, and he had to steel himself against it to approach and step over the cordon.

It didn’t actually *look* like much. If you looked straight at it, it would be easy not to notice it at all. But from the side, in your periphery, it seemed to sort of bulge at the space around it.

Strange glanced up at him and Wong as they approached. “Did you stop for coffee on the way or something?” he asked.

“He slept in,” Wong said, jerking a thumb in Loki’s direction.

“Well.” Strange looked Loki up and down, seemed satisfied (though Loki didn’t know what he was looking for) and said, “I guess I can’t begrudge you that.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Why am I here?” Whatever they’d cultivated the previous day, whether it was less distrust, or, perhaps, somehow, possibly, the beginnings of a tentative friendship, seemed like an illusion in the bright, sterile hallway of the hospital.

“Didn’t Wong tell you?” Strange asked. “To help. Oh, welcome to Metro-General, by the way. I used to work here.”

“Yes,” Loki said, “‘to help.’ So I’ve heard. And I’ll tell you what I told him, which is that I would prefer something a bit less vague—”

Strange made a motion with his hands and orange magic flared out from them, flowing from his shaking palms and snaking along the floor and up into the air. Loki watched, his expression giving nothing away as the orange tendrils outlined the soft spot. “That’s what I was afraid of,” Strange muttered.

“It’s massive,” Loki said, feeling a tinge of alarm. Things were getting worse.

“Yeah.” Strange cocked his head, then looked at Wong. “Did you bring it?”

With interest, Loki looked towards Wong. He still hadn’t been able to properly explore the Chamber of Relics, and he was dying to know what was being kept in there, and what something from the collection might look like in action. But then, Wong pulled out...

...a bluetooth speaker.

“*Perfect*,” Strange said, taking it from Wong. “I owe you.” He set the speaker on the floor and pulled his phone out, tapping it until music started playing. The disappointment was, no doubt, showing on Loki’s face, because Strange looked at him and said, “Loser.”

His eyebrows shooting up, Loki said, "I beg your pardon?"

There was a faint smile on Strange's face. "The song. 'Loser,' by Beck. Released as a single in 1993, re-released February 4, 1994. Peaked at number ten. You know, Beck thought the song was mediocre?" Of course Loki didn't know, but Strange clearly didn't expect a response. He turned back to the soft spot, and as the music played, he said, "They're getting bigger."

"Yes," Wong agreed. "Bolder, too, to invade the London Sanctum."

"That could have been chance."

"Do you really think so?"

"No," Strange said, his voice grim.

At that moment, a woman's voice said, "Hey, aren't you guys supposed to be keeping this stuff from happening? Having one of these things appear next to the nurse's station isn't really my idea of 'not happening.'"

Loki turned to see a petite woman duck under the cordon. She touched Strange on the arm and said, "Hey, Stephen. Wong, nice to see you. Who's this guy, another magician?"

When Loki raised an eyebrow at Strange, smiling a touch caustically, Strange said, "Yeah. You could say that."

"Christine Palmer," she said, holding a hand out to Loki.

He shook it. "Doctor Palmer?" he asked.

"Great doctor," Strange said before she could answer, as he knelt down and cast another spell over the soft spot. She smiled and rolled her eyes, but it was clear that she appreciated the compliment. "Oh, by the way," Strange added, waving a hand towards Loki, "recognize your patient?"

Doctor Palmer looked at Loki again, her face puzzled, and then her mouth dropped open. "No," she said. "No way." Stepping closer to him and tilting her head, as though he was a particularly interesting specimen, she reached out and poked a finger at his chest, then seemed surprised when she met the resistance of skin, muscle, and bone. "You should be dead," she said, wonder in her tone. "Stephen," she said, turning around, "how the hell is he not dead?"

"What," Strange said, "you didn't believe me when I said I'd keep him alive?"

"No," Palmer said, swiveling back to Loki and looking him up and down.

"Ouch," Strange said, and when Wong chuckled, he said, "Oh, you laugh at *that*?"

Studying Loki again, Palmer said, "You should have been out of commission for months. I've never even *seen* a wound like that, the fact that you survived it is..."

"A miracle?" Loki supplied.

She snorted. "If I believed in those."

"Well." He smiled slightly. "There *is* that."

Shaking her head, she said, "Incredible. Stephen, this wasn't something you learned in the cult, was it?"

“Cult?” Wong asked.

Strange waved a hand at him, then said, “No, he did it all himself.”

Loki caught Strange’s eye, an unspoken question in his gaze. *Does she not know who I am?* Strange gave him a tiny shrug, which was answer enough.

Palmer put her hands on her hips and looked at Loki again, considering this. “What did you say your name was?” she asked, her brow crinkling.

“I didn’t,” Loki said, his tone pleasant. Then, something caught his attention. “Why are you doing it that way?” Loki asked, staring hard at Strange and Wong.

Both of them looked at him, then at each other. “We’re binding it,” Strange finally said. “So it doesn’t open up and become a doorway.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “*That’s* your solution? A binding spell? On something of this size?”

“We seal the ones that are already open,” Strange said, but his tone was distracted as he narrowed his eyes in thought at Loki. “Why? What would you do?”

Rolling his eyes, Loki said, “Stand back.” Then, in a lower voice, he sniffed, “Amateurs.” As Strange and Wong got to their feet and stepped back, Loki lifted his arms. Green limned his hands and arms, and he pushed and shaped his magic with his mind until it flowed out, surrounding the edges of the soft spot. This would be more difficult without—well, Thor had helped. Thor had magic too, even if he didn’t always like admitting it, and Loki had been able to draw on it while he’d done this. It had steadied him, grounded him.

He could feel Strange’s and Wong’s magic, but it was too unfamiliar for him to reach out to. Anyway, that would have been bad form, and his mother hadn’t raised him to be rude. That made him smile bitterly. His mother hadn’t raised him to do a lot of the things he’d done.

There was no physical way to describe what he was doing, but he thought of it like sewing up a tear in clothing. His magic threaded around the outer edges of the soft spot until all the strands were in place. Once or twice, they slipped, and he had to carefully gather them back together while trying not to lose his hold on the others. The soft spot fought him the whole time, trying to disgorge more of itself into their dimension.

Then, making a twisting motion with his hand, he pulled the threads taut, drawing them together. There was a shimmer of green, and then, suddenly, the soft spot was gone.

Loki drew in a deep breath and lowered his arms, feeling shaky. Perhaps his magic wasn’t entirely recovered. Then again, closing a hole between dimensions required a lot of power, certainly more than it would appear to anyone watching. Case in point, Palmer was looking at where the soft spot had been, a puzzled expression on her face.

“What happened?” she asked. “Did you just get rid of it?”

His neck felt clammy with sweat. Disgusting. “Yes.”

She looked doubtful. “Last time I saw Stephen take care of one of these things, there was a lot more...” Waving her hands vaguely in the air, she finished, “...magic-y stuff.” Something seemed to occur to her. “Of course, he does like to show off.”

“Yes,” Loki said, “I’ve noticed that his magic is rather...flashy.” Strange gave him a disgruntled

look and a smile twitched at Loki's mouth.

For the first time, he looked around the hallway. Now that the excitement was over, the hospital staff was going back to their duties. There were two doctors, however, who were standing nearby, looking at him and speaking in quiet tones to each other.

Hm. Perhaps he should have worn a glamor, or at the very least a spell to make him forgettable. Strange *had* mentioned that the American authorities might still be looking for him. Too late now. He would have to hope his proximity to two Masters of the Mystic Arts would keep him unmolested.

Strange was looking at the two doctors. His eyes flicked from them to Loki, and then he said, "Come on, let's go."

Palmer had noticed the direction of Strange and Loki's gazes too. Shooting Strange a meaningful look, she mouthed, *I've got this*, and approached the other doctors. "Hey, Matt, Kelly, I wanted to talk to you about that bounceback in Three..." Expertly, she got them turned around and walking in the other direction, though one of them glanced over his shoulder once.

With a grin, Strange said under his breath, "Thanks Christine, I owe you." Then, scooping up the bluetooth speaker from the floor, he stepped over the cordon. Wong and Loki followed, and the three of them returned to the broom closet that had been Loki's first introduction to Metro-General. Circling a hand, Strange opened a portal, then held out an arm, in an unmistakable gesture of, *back to the Sanctum you go*.

Loki didn't move. "Was that it?" he said. "Bring me out for thirty minutes, see what I can do, and then send me back? I suppose neither of *you* were planning on returning." The look that Strange and Wong exchanged was answer enough. "Please don't tell me you think I'm going to run off and cause some kind of havoc. I'm long past that."

"Actually," Strange said, shutting the door behind them, "I'm more concerned about other people misunderstanding your intentions."

Clearly, the doctors that Christine had led away were on his mind. Loki smiled thinly. "That's easily taken care of. With a mental flick of his mind, he cast a spell.

Wong and Strange both looked confused. "Nothing's different," Strange said. "Can't you change forms?"

"Yes, and I can cast illusions," Loki said. "You won't have noticed this one because you're already well aware of who's standing in front of you, but to anyone else—" He shrugged. "I'm just a forgettable man."

Looking like he was trying not to smile, Strange said, "Forgettable? You? Hard to imagine." Loki smirked at him. After exchanging another look with Wong, he said, "Okay. You can come." Abruptly, he closed the portal and opened another one, through which Loki could see Central Park. Wong stepped through and Strange motioned for Loki to go next.

So. It seemed that he truly was working with these people now. It was a far cry from running.

Maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

Chapter 6

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



Loki turned the page of the grimoire, propping his head on his hand as he read. The book hadn't really been a conscious choice—*Key of Solomon*, it was called, and it had simply been the first thing on the library shelf that had called to him. The green leather that it was bound in had probably just caught his eye.

Then caste the paper into the fyer and saye:

Cursed and blasphemed be you for euer, let there be noe rest to you any hower, any day, or any nighte, because you haue not obeyed the wordes, wch were spokenn of the might maker of all thinges.

Cheerful, in other words. But perhaps appropriate for him. He *had* always felt cursed.

The human who had written this book had thought he'd come up with a way to raise spirits. It was...quaint. On the other hand, on Asgard, there were ways to raise the dead, though Loki had never dabbled in them. He'd asked his mother once, but she'd simply said that the dead were dead, and the living were living, and it was for the best if they kept to their separate realms. The possibility had always tempted him, if only because it was difficult magic and he liked a challenge, but his mother was the wisest person on Asgard—possibly the universe—and he'd minded what she'd said.

His eyes unfocused and his mind drifted. He'd performed a lot of magic today, helping Strange and Wong fortify ley lines and magical pylons throughout the city, and it had left him tired and mentally drained. It was easy to wander into memories, which were, frankly, the last place he wanted to be.

Thor swung his hammer, slamming into the creature's chin and sending it flying, while Loki finished sealing the soft spot. A creature at his feet stirred and Loki plunged a dagger into its chest.

Thor's shoulders were heaving, not just with the exertion of the fight. His expression was filled with rage and pain as he looked at the creatures they'd killed. "Dark Elves," he growled.

Raising his eyebrows, Loki said, "They aren't my favorite either, but you seem particularly perturbed by them."

Thor glared down at the Dark Elf. Then, he kicked it, as sirens wailed in the distance, coming closer. "We should go," Thor said.

"Agreed." The two of them melted into the shadows in the alley, leaving the scene of the latest intrusion from Ultimus's dimension. They didn't like to stick around once they'd closed a soft spot and taken care of the creatures that came through. Loki usually wasn't well received, to put it lightly. And there was bitterness about the fact that Thor hadn't been around when most of the Avengers had met their demises.

"I know I shouldn't relish their deaths, but I can't forgive them," Thor said darkly.

Loki glanced at him as they walked. "I see no reason not to relish their deaths. Not after what they did."

His face growing more troubled, Thor said, "I hate thinking of it. I hate remembering..." But he stopped, and Loki didn't blame him. Thor had told him everything: Jane being infected by the Aether, Malekith, the leader of the Dark Elves, coming for it. The resulting battle, where both Jane and their mother had been killed. The final confrontation, where Malekith was defeated, but where Odin lost his life.

And if there was one thing that Loki understood, it was not wanting to relive terrible memories.

Thor glanced at him, then put a hand on his shoulder. "You're all I have left, brother."

There was something deeply sad about this, not just the sentiment itself, but the fact that Thor was saying it at all. "What about our sister?" Loki said, smiling grimly. When Thor just looked at him, he let the smile drop off his face, then looked at the ground. The right thing to say was that Thor was all he had left, too, but he couldn't fathom allowing those words to come out of his mouth.

His eyes stared at the page, locked on the words without seeing them, as memories scrabbled at his mind.

Then, footsteps, and a voice saying, "Have some tea. You look miserable."

Loki glanced up from the book and said, "That's the look of someone who's concentrating on what they're reading. You should try it sometime."

Strange smiled and set a cup down in front of Loki, then sat down across the table. The dig had been unnecessary and churlish. But he didn't like being surprised by other people, particularly through inattention on his part, and he especially didn't like being patronized. Of course he looked miserable. He was remembering his brother and his brain was trying to force him to face a reality that he wasn't ready for.

He closed the book and pushed it away, then reached for the tea. "I don't suppose you have something stronger to put in this?" Loki asked, raising an eyebrow. A bottle of whisky appeared on the table, and he snorted. "Thanks." The next time he looked down at the cup, it smelled distinctly more boozy, and there was a slice of lemon in it. Strange was showing off.

As he sipped at the tea, or rather, what had been tea and was now a hot toddy, Loki said, "What's

the bottle for, if you can just magically turn water into cocktails?”

“Oh, that’s in case you want to drink without the distraction of the tea,” Strange replied, that smile still on his face. Loki wanted to be annoyed by it, but he found himself snorting unwillingly in dark amusement. Strange’s smile was...well, not really *nice*, and that was probably why Loki found himself liking it. That was to say, there was a dry sarcasm behind it, which Loki couldn’t help but appreciate. Aesthetically speaking, it was a nice smile.

The two of them sat in silence that felt almost companionable. Maybe it *was* companionable. Loki didn’t really have a lot of experience in that arena. He sipped at his drink again, then held the cup in his hands to warm his fingers, which were freezing, as always. “Is that what the two of you do every day?”

Strange slouched back in the chair. He’d changed out of his robes and was wearing a t-shirt with an unzipped sweatshirt over it. It made him look very human, though not, Loki was surprised to find himself thinking, in a bad way. Doctor Stephen Strange, Master of the Mystic Arts, was formidable in some way that Loki couldn’t put his finger on. A force to be reckoned with, even though Loki was quite sure he was actually the more powerful of the two. Someone...untouchable, perhaps. Stephen Strange, the man whose weird old house he was currently staying in, was different. Also in some way, unhelpfully, that Loki couldn’t quite put his finger on. Maybe without the robes and the cloak, he let himself relax a little.

“Mostly,” Strange replied. When Loki nodded, he added, “Thanks, by the way. For helping.”

With a shrug, Loki said, “I find if I’m not useful, I very quickly wear out my welcome.”

That made Strange chuckle. He met Loki’s eyes from lowered brows and said, “I’d disagree with you, but there’s not much chance I’d have any way to back it up. There’s no shortage of things for you to help with.” He leaned forward and folded his hands on the table. “You know, we were pretty sure it was you and Thor showing up to soft spots around the city, but usually no one actually saw you doing it.”

Loki raised a hand and green sparks danced on his fingertips. “Magic, Doctor Strange. Glamor. Illusions. The people of this fair city see what I want them to see.”

“And you didn’t want them to see the two of you?” When Loki inclined his head, Strange said, “Not interested in rehabilitating your image?”

With a mirthless smile, Loki said, “I doubt it’s possible to rehabilitate my image. Though you seem determined to allow me a chance to do so.”

Strange considered him, then said, “I guess it’s because I got a second chance. I try to give other people a shot at them, too.”

“Even when they don’t deserve them?” Loki asked, arching an eyebrow.

There was a silence. Loki sipped at his drink again. It could be stronger. Drumming his fingers on the table, Strange said, apparently *apropos* of nothing, “You went up against an interdimensional warlord.”

“And lost,” Loki replied. Did Strange think doing this had, in some way, made him worthy of a second chance? It was exactly the opposite.

The look on Strange’s face was matter-of-fact. “That should go without saying.”

Loki gave a joyless laugh. “We’re gods. It *shouldn’t* go without saying.” He sighed, swirling his drink around, then poured more whisky in his mug. “Can I ask you something?”

Strange looked surprised, then said, “Sure.”

After taking another drink—yes, stronger now, that was good—Loki asked, “Why did you save my life?”

For a long moment, Strange watched him, a look flickering in his eyes that Loki recognized. An answer, but one which he preferred not to share. Or maybe Loki was reading something into his expression that wasn’t there. He couldn’t quite shake the feeling that maybe he was looking for a friend, despite knowing better.

After a minute, Strange’s eyes flicked away from Loki’s, and he said, “I’m a doctor. Do no harm, remember?”

“You’re not *really* a doctor, though,” Loki said. “And you didn’t seem to have much compunction about killing those creatures.”

At that, Strange’s face froze, and Loki felt guilt prick at him. He hadn’t meant to be difficult. That made him sneer at himself. That made a change. “I *do* have some compunction about it, actually,” Strange said in a low tone. “If there was some other way, I’d take it. But they won’t go back, and it’s not like anyone out there is looking into how to turn them back into normal people.”

“You assume they *can* be turned back into normal people,” Loki said, raising an eyebrow.

“I try to be optimistic.”

Loki snorted. “And here I was thinking you didn’t have any bad qualities.”

Damn. Another slip. Something about Strange made him drop his guard. Something about Strange put him at *ease*, and Loki wasn’t particularly familiar with that feeling. And the wizard was the last person who should make him feel that way. After all, he had Loki’s name on a watchlist. He was one of the few people on this planet who could probably give Loki a bit of a fight. A more interesting one than the Avengers’ pet beast, too.

His spine twinged at the thought of another encounter with the Hulk, but it was unlikely. He’d disappeared in a SHIELD Quinjet several years ago. No word from him or of him since. Presumed dead. Loki couldn’t say he’d mourned.

Strange was studying him. “Don’t you think they deserve a chance to have their lives back?” he asked. “If we could give it to them?”

With a sniff, Loki replied, “Whether or not they deserve it is irrelevant.” He hesitated, then decided he needed to elaborate. “If you’re asking me whether I think they deserve their fates, the answer is no. They didn’t choose to serve Ultimus. Most of them didn’t, anyway. But they *are* Ultimus’s servants, and the only way to stop them is to kill them.”

Resting his trembling fingers on the tabletop looking down, Strange said, “There were probably people that thought the same thing about you.”

Loki stared at him until he looked up. “They may have been right,” he replied without blinking. When Strange raised his eyebrows, Loki shrugged and sat back in his chair. He was playing the villain again. It was such an easy role to slip back into.

“Come on,” Strange said. “You don’t actually believe that.”

Letting his gaze drop to the table, Loki smiled faintly, joylessly, and said, “I’ve never known what to believe, Doctor.”

There was a long silence. Strange opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again. Unusual. From their short acquaintance, he didn’t strike Loki as the type to think twice about what was about to come out of his mouth. But then, finally, he said, “You’re supposed to call me Stephen.”

This hadn’t been what Loki was expecting. A genuine smile flickered across his face and he said, “Yes, well, that’s a bit familiar for me.”

A sardonic smile pulled at the corner of Strange’s mouth. “You’ve never had many friends, have you?”

Arching an eyebrow, Loki asked, “What gave it away?”

“Yeah I don’t know, just a gut feeling.” Strange’s smile stayed that way, a lopsided invitation to something that Loki was sure he didn’t deserve. Friendship? Being his friend didn’t come with many benefits.

Still. Strange knew who he was and knew what he’d done, and the two of them were still sitting at the table together. That was worth something, even if Loki didn’t know what it was. It didn’t make them friends. Did it?

After a silence, Strange said, “Anyway, you must have believed something. You’ve been fighting for Earth for...how long now?”

Loki shook his head. “I’ve been trained practically since childhood to fight. It just comes naturally.” Glib. Like the villain role, this one was easy to slip into, as well. Ever the Asgardian. Ever the warrior, even if it had always been an uneasy fit on Loki.

“Okay.” Strange leaned forward. “So if it’s just about fighting—what do you fight for?”

Loki stared at him, then smiled slightly and poured more whiskey into his mug. It was all alcohol now. “I told you,” he said. “I’ve never known what to believe. That means I’ve never known what I’m fighting for, either.”

Strange’s stare didn’t waver. “Do you actually think that’s true or do you just expect other people to buy it?”

There was a pause while they held each other’s eyes, and then Loki chuckled. “Alright. Fine. The reason I’ve never been sure is because experience has taught me that you can either fight for the greater good or fight to protect the people you love.” Strange didn’t speak and Loki went on more quietly, the smile dropping off his face, “The two are rarely compatible.”

Strange laid his palms flat on the table. The scars running from the tips of his fingers to his wrists drew Loki’s eye. Maybe he should have asked for the full story. A car accident wouldn’t have left marks like that, and Loki was curious how Strange had fought his hopeless cause.

Meeting Loki’s eyes again, Strange asked, “So what did you do?”

Loki tried to smile again, though it was bitter. “I couldn’t choose. Clearly the worst option.”

Strange held out a hand. The bottle slid across the table into it, and when a tumbler appeared, he shakily filled it with whisky and downed half of it. “It goes without saying I think you’re wrong.”

“Hm.” Loki swallowed a mouthful of his drink. His head felt fuzzy. “I hope for your sake that you never come to agree with me.”

“Maybe I’ll change your mind.”

Maybe, Stephen. Out loud, though, he said, “I doubt it.”

Strange made a noise but didn’t argue, draining the rest of his tumbler. As he got up from the table, he said, “I’ll see you tomorrow. Feel free to finish off the whisky if you want.” Loki nodded. Then, to his surprise, Strange came around to the other side of the table and put a hand on Loki’s shoulder, squeezing once. His grip wasn’t very strong, but it was...what?

As Strange left, then vanished with a whoosh from the doorway, the right word occurred to Loki.

Nice.

It was nice.

Chapter 7

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



Things went along this way, the three of them strengthening magical protections and sealing soft spots. Strange and Wong were better at identifying them before they opened up than Loki and Thor had ever been, and they also were concerned with a much wider area. A couple continents, to be specific. In a few short weeks, using the Rotunda of Gateways, Loki had visited thirty-seven of fifty American states, several Canadian provinces, every country in South America, and Mexico City three times. He'd discovered that the mosquitos in the Amazon loved Jotun blood, that cochinita pibil was delicious, and that Americans were deeply passionate about how their barbecue was prepared. He drank in the loneliness of the Great Plains, walked barefoot in Salar de Uyuni, and sat on a glacier in Torres del Paine while he stared at the bluest water he'd ever seen.

One night, Loki and Strange found themselves closing one soft spot after another in a small town in Newfoundland, Canada, a chain of them opening up across the forest while deer snorted, flattened their ears, and slipped silently in the opposite direction. Afterwards, exhausted, they watched the sun rise from Cape Spear while seabirds keened and the wind from the ocean blew through Loki's hair.

Strange glanced over at him and smiled tiredly, then said, "And I didn't even tell you I was going to show you the world when you signed up for this."

Loki chuckled, watching the sun's red fingers creep up the cliff. "The fact that you think all of this doesn't pale in comparison to some of the things I've seen across the galaxy is almost cute."

"Uh huh." There was a silence and then Strange looked at him. Loki turned his head to meet the other man's gaze. "Has anyone ever told you that you get this look in your eyes when you say something insulting that you don't mean?"

Replies flitted through his mind as Loki stared at him. Finally, he said, "I very much doubt that's true, so no." The only response he got was a sardonic smile from Strange. The two of them lapsed into silence as the sun came up. A gull circled by on an updraft, eyeing them, and flapped its wings

once. Waves crashed at the bottom of the cliff. As the sun finally lifted over the horizon, Loki admitted, “It’s beautiful, though. I suppose.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Strange glance at him, and he turned his head to meet his eyes. The dawn lit half of his face, illuminating the sharp planes of his cheekbones, bringing out faint gold highlights in his dark hair. Loki realized he wasn’t even sure what color Strange’s eyes were. Blue? Green? Gray? Right now they looked blue, as blue as the vast Atlantic Ocean spread out before them.

He shook himself. He was tired. What did it matter what color Strange’s eyes were?

But his gaze lingered and he thought again, *Beautiful.*

When he was awake, he thought he could keep doing this. He filled his days and though he rarely stopped thinking, his mind, at least, focused on specific problems. If he couldn’t stop his thoughts from running, he could at least direct them.

But he had to sleep. And when he slept, he dreamed. It was always Thor.

“You would have liked Jane, brother.”

“Why?”

This makes Thor pause. Then, he says, “She was smart. Much smarter than me.”

Loki snorts and says, for old time’s sake, “It wouldn’t take much.” There’s no bite in his tone, though. He finishes the hot dog that Thor, under a glamor of Loki’s making, bought. Thor’s on his third. Wiping his hands on a napkin, he glances up at his brother and says, “I regret that I never met her.”

There are tears in Thor’s eyes, which he tries to blink away. Hesitantly, Loki reaches out and touches his arm. It’s the first time since their reconciliation that he’s initiated such contact.

Another night, another memory:

“Hold on,” Loki says, offering his arm to Thor as the Tesseract appears in his hand.

Thor looks at him dubiously. “Why?”

“Because,” Loki says, “the last place you want to get stuck is the dimension with all the creepy hands.”

“The what?”

Loki grimaces. “Like I said.”

And another:

“Father was sorry, you know—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Thor, stop.” Loki rolls his eyes and has to stop himself from casting a spell on Thor, or perhaps giving him a warning stab. “He was your father. Not mine.”

“Loki, he loved you,” Thor says.

With a hard bark of laughter, Loki says, “Oh, yes, clearly. That must be why he practically told me

to hurl myself into the abyss.”

“That isn’t what happened,” Thor says.

They’ve had this conversation once before in extremely different circumstances. There isn’t anything more to be said. “I may have made mistakes,” Loki says, “but he looked me in the eye and rejected me. You know he did.”

Rage clutches at Loki’s chest, rage which he can’t seem to let go of. He doesn’t hate Odin, but he’ll never forgive him. The wound hasn’t even begun to heal.

There’s silence before Thor says, “He made mistakes. With both of us, but especially you. But he loved you. It was one of the last things he said to me before—before he was killed.”

Clenching his fists, Loki says, “I don’t care.”

It’s a lie. He knows Thor knows it’s a lie, but his brother has said what he wanted to say.

Loki woke up and considered not sleeping anymore.

When he’d gotten ready and gone downstairs, he found a note in Wong’s handwriting in the kitchen, informing him the two Masters were out. ‘(Mordo)’ had been added in a much shakier hand. Loki felt a smile on his face, though he didn’t know why. There was certainly nothing nice about Strange and Wong’s missing friend. He put a finger to the note, where Strange had made the effort to write, then turned away to find something to eat for breakfast.

He grabbed several books on his way back upstairs, detoured to the Rotunda of Gateways to watch for any interdimensional trouble, until eventually returning to his room. Opening one of the books, he settled back against the headboard of his bed and started reading.

His eyes, though, couldn’t seem to focus. There was an itch in his mind and in his fingertips. He wanted to go somewhere, do something, though he didn’t know what. Sitting up and crossing his legs, he held out a hand and separated his astral form from his body by a few inches, creating a double-vision effect. When was the last time he’d astral projected himself anywhere? It wasn’t something he liked doing if he didn’t feel at least marginally safe, and really, he hadn’t felt marginally safe since his Fall from Asgard

Until now. As much as he hated to admit it, he felt safe here. Imagine that.

He let his astral form slip further out of his body. Even a Master of Magic needed to practice. His mother had drilled that into him from a young age, making it a prerequisite to teaching him magic. He’d spent several months learning how to play the lute just to prove he could practice every day. The best thing about it was that his horrendous playing had annoyed Thor. And, of course, that he’d proved he could commit to something and stick with it.

Obviously, he’d given up the lute when Mother had started to teach him her magic. Sometimes he regretted that. It might have been nice to be able to play an instrument.

Gods, the thought of her hurt. The last time he’d seen her, she’d looked at him in disbelief and shock, as Thor had returned to Asgard after his banishment. At least he hadn’t ever had to see the look on her face when she found out what he’d done on Earth after his Fall. Though even facing her disappointment, and possibly rejection, would have been better than never seeing her again at all.

Somehow, without having really made a decision, he knew where he was going to go. Taking a

deep breath, he straightened his spine, closed his eyes, and sent his astral form hurtling through space. Without the Tesseract, he wouldn't have been able to do this. Just as the gem in his scepter had allowed him to astral project back to the Sanctuary, the Tesseract allowed him to draw on its power to send his astral form infinitely further than he could have without it.

And then, somehow—why?—he was the last place he should have been going. In the distance, sunlight gleamed off gold towers. His eyes focused on the palace, and with a slow breath through his nose, he set off through Asgard's streets.

The city was empty. He'd expected that, but it was still eerie. The lower city had been gutted by fire. Wood buildings were nothing but ruins; those that had been made of stone had survived, though most of them had still had wooden roofs and were blackened by soot and smoke damage. He walked slowly through the streets, memories assailing him as he passed familiar places. There was the alehouse that Thor had taken him to get drunk the first time—and there was the alley that Loki had puked his guts out afterwards. And there, the alehouse where Loki had challenged Thor to a drinking contest and enchanted his own drink to never get him drunk. Thor had made use of the same alleyway to vomit copiously.

He slowly ascended a staircase, moving through the city. The silence didn't get any less unnerving. Somehow it didn't help that there weren't any bodies, either. Hela, the sister that he had yet to meet, had murdered thousands of their people, then invaded the other eight realms and kept right on killing. But there was no evidence of it. That struck him as a bad sign.

To be honest, he'd expected to find some of Ultimus's creatures here. There were open soft spots—he passed one in the training grounds—but apparently they'd abandoned Asgard. Hela had done Ultimus's job for him here. Whatever Asgardians had survived Malekith's attack had been finished off by her. The survivors had fled and scattered across the galaxy. Thor hadn't known where. The Bifrost had been an asset for Hela, but Ultimus didn't need it. Why *would* he expend forces here?

When he arrived at the palace, he stopped, his hands clenching. He couldn't. He couldn't go in there. The rest of Asgard he could face, but not this. The great hall, the throne room, the gardens. His parents' quarters. His own, assuming they hadn't been cleaned out after his presumed death. Thor's. His entire childhood, his entire life, an empty, dead husk.

Instead, he turned his back on the palace and made his way out to the edge of one of the terraces surrounding it, where he put his hands on the wall and gazed at the city. It wasn't even inhabited by ghosts. It was barren. Their people were extinct, or they might as well be. Asgard was like a fossil, a city ossified by abandonment and time. And he should never have come, but he couldn't tear himself away. This was his home. It was gone.

Something tugged at him, a presence, on the other side of the galaxy where his physical form was. Loki's eyes focused back on the wall of the room as his awareness retreated from Asgard, its blue sky and sparkling water and gold turrets telescoping away into blackness. "I know you're there," he said, not turning around. "You can stop lurking in the doorway."

There was a rustle of cloth, then a creak, and Loki shifted so that he could see the door. Strange was standing there, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against the doorframe. "Where were you?" Strange asked curiously.

Loki stared at him, one of his eyebrows raised just a hair higher than the other. "I've been right here all morning."

"Uh huh." Strange couldn't have looked less convinced. "You know what I mean."

Smiling, mostly to hide the fact that pain was shredding his heart, Loki said, “Nowhere special.” Neither of them spoke. Perhaps Strange could guess where Loki’s consciousness had been. Or maybe he could simply tell that this wasn’t a moment to intrude.

Finally, though, Strange asked, “Everything quiet here?”

Loki flicked a wrist. “No alarms all morning. I suppose that means everything’s as quiet as it can be.” Strange chuckled, and Loki tilted his head. “Any luck tracking down your friend?”

Shaking his head, Strange said, “No. We thought we had a lead, but...” He shrugged. “Turned out to be nothing.”

Loki nodded, hesitating. Then, he said, “I hope you find him soon.”

There was a flicker of surprise in Strange’s eyes, but all he said was, “Thanks.”

This time, Loki shrugged and looked away. Was there anything worse than being thanked? Especially when he’d done nothing. Glancing back up at Strange, he said, “You haven’t stopped lurking yet. Come in, if you’re just going to stand there.”

A smile flashed across Strange’s face and he came in, settling down in the chair. Folding his hands in his lap, he said, “You *were* astral projecting, right?”

Loki wasn’t sure he wanted to admit to it, but then he said, “Yes.”

“You don’t use the same method we do.”

“*That* should go without saying.” Raising an eyebrow, Loki added, “But, my dear doctor, how would you know that? Not prying into my magic without my permission, are we?”

With a chuckle, Strange said, “I wouldn’t even if I thought I could. It was just a guess.” His hands shifted, trembling as he interlaced his fingers. “Your magic is...”

“Incredible? Amazing? *Vastly* superior to your own?”

Giving him an unruffled look, Strange said, “I was going to say ‘interesting.’”

A smile twitched at Loki’s mouth. “I see.”

Strange leaned back in the chair, putting his hands on his legs. There was a look on his face that Loki wasn’t used to seeing. Not quite uncertainty, but—caution, perhaps? A desire to ask for something, but awareness that he might be on treacherous ground? Loki waited.

Leaning forward, Strange said, “I’d love to know how it works.”

Ah. Maybe Loki should have seen that coming. After all, he was curious how Strange’s magic worked too. He just preferred to find out on his own, rather than being direct and asking. Being direct wasn’t exactly his thing. “I don’t think I can explain how it works,” he said, actually feeling regretful about disappointing Strange. “You learn your magic, correct? All humans, in theory, have the ability to harness power from other dimensions to perform the spells you do?”

“When you say it like that, I don’t feel quite as special anymore.”

A smile flickered across Loki’s face. “Don’t worry, I doubt anyone would argue that *you’re* not special.” He stopped, startled at his own words, then pressed on, as though it had been nothing to take note of, “That isn’t how magic works on Asgard. It’s something you’re born with. If you’re

not, no amount of training will ever induce the ability to appear. So there's no method I can describe to you, no lesson that will allow you to perform magic the way I do." A thought occurred to him. A stupid thought.

An *exceedingly* stupid thought.

It was showing on his face, because Strange gave him a questioning look. Loki licked his lips, feeling his heart stutter a little with nerves. Also stupid. Of course, for someone as smart as he was, he certainly had a history of bad decisions. Why not add another to the list?

Slowly, he said, "I can't describe it to you. But—if you'd like, I could...show you."

"Show me?"

Loki hesitated again, then made his decision. Drawing his legs up to sit cross-legged, he motioned for Strange to come sit next to him. When Strange did so, Loki, faced him and held out a hand. "May I?" The collar of the Cloak rippled, drifted towards Loki, then settled back into place. At Strange's nod, Loki put a hand lightly to his shoulder. He let his fingers rest there, and then his eyes flicked up to meet Strange's.

With a slight smile, Loki twirled a finger. Magic flowed through him, down his arms to his fingertips, and he concentrated and channeled it through Strange, too. It hit something in the wizard, some sort of friction, a force unlike anything Loki had ever felt, and twined around it. Neither force submitted to the other, it was more like...like they sized each other up, found the other satisfying, or perhaps worthy. Strange jerked and his hand went out, his fingers brushing Loki's knee in surprise.

And then the spell scattered, passing through both of them into the room. Power rippled back through Loki and suddenly it was like he could *see* Strange, not just with his eyes, but with every sense he had. Not mind reading, but an opening of soul that almost made him pull away. But he'd committed to this decision, bad or not, and occasionally, he could follow through on his commitments. Strange let him in, dropping his defenses, and the two of them circled each other, their respective magics feeling like they were caught in a dance and Loki knew for one white-hot, blinding fraction of a second, with a certainty that he'd rarely felt about anything, that he was right to trust Strange, right to help him, right to be here.

The room went dark as glowing green and gold orbs flickered into being, floating in the air above them. The...connection, or whatever it had been, dissipated, leaving Loki feeling shaken. Strange raised his gaze to the orbs, then looked back to Loki. There was...so much on his face. It was open as it rarely was. But all he said was, "Pretty."

Loki waved a hand and the room returned to normal. He pretended he hadn't noticed Strange's expression. "Yes," he said. The spell itself hadn't been anything special. A party trick, something he'd learned as a teenager to impress the girls and boys that he'd pined after. "Did you feel it?"

An idiotic question. How could Strange *not* have felt it? Whatever he'd just done, Loki hadn't ever experienced anything like it. And if he'd known that would happen, he never would have suggested it in the first place. But he had, and it was done. Belatedly, he realized his hand was still on Strange's shoulder and removed it.

Strange nodded, seeming lost for words. Clearly, he'd felt the same thing that Loki had. The *connection*. He didn't know what else to call it. But all Strange said was, "Look, at the risk of sounding ignorant, how did you do that?"

No mention of anything deeper. Fine. Good. “I told you,” Loki said, “I can’t describe how I do magic, that was the whole point—”

Touching Loki’s knee again, Strange said, “No, that’s what I mean. How did you...push your magic through me like that?”

Loki considered lying. Making something up to try to bolster the illusion that he had control of anything in his life. Instead, he replied, “I don’t know. I just did it.” A swift, thin smile passed over his face. “I’m considered quite the gifted sorcerer.”

Strange smiled. “Now, *that* I knew.”

There was another silence, which seemed like it should have been uncomfortable. But it wasn’t. Loki felt something—maybe everything—in him edging towards being at ease with this human wizard. This human wizard who had given him a chance. But there wasn’t any point in talking about what had happened. They had both felt it, they hadn’t expected it, and neither of them had words to describe it. Words weren’t necessary, anyway, since Loki knew that neither of them would ever mention it to another soul.

Then, Strange asked, “Do you feel that magic in you? All the time?”

Surprised, Loki replied, “Yes, of course. Don’t you feel yours?”

Strange shook his head. “Not like that. It’s more like a skill I know I have. Like playing the piano or performing brain surgery. I mean, not that I can do either of those things anymore, but you get the idea. What I just felt in you, though, it was like...” He paused, considering. “Like something wild. A river, or the sky, or a storm.”

“Not a storm,” Loki said quietly.

Strange’s brow furrowed. “Okay. Not a storm.”

No one had ever described his magic that way. *Loki* had never thought of it that way. It was simply a part of who he was and he’d never stopped to try to quantify it. To cover the fact that Strange had wrong-footed him yet again, he said with a smirk, “I don’t think anyone’s ever been quite so poetic in describing anything about me. I don’t tend to inspire it.”

Strange looked like Loki had just handed him a gift. He cleared his throat and recited, ““His beauty was hard to fix or see, for he was always glimmering, flickering, melting, mixing, he was the shape of a shapeless flame, he was the eddying thread of needle-shapes in the shapeless mass of the waterfall. He was the invisible wind that hurried the clouds in billows and ribbons.”” When Loki stared at him, his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth in surprise, Strange said, “A.S. Byatt. *Ragnarok*. Good book. Pretty poetic.”

Human literature. As though he was going to express pleasure at being described thusly by—what? A *novelist*? “I stand corrected,” Loki finally said.

Strange shifted back, then stood up, like he’d suddenly realized he’d crossed a line he hadn’t meant to. Again, he looked at a loss for words, and Loki took some satisfaction from that. Strange may have been able to quote literature at him, but Loki could get him to shut up, if only for a minute. “Well,” Strange finally said, smiling wryly, “I’ll let you astral project in peace.”

Loki nodded, but as he started to leave, he said, “Strange.” The wizard stopped and turned around. The Cloak drifted lazily in Loki’s direction. He hesitated, and then amended, “Stephen.”

It was the first time he'd said Strange's given name. It felt nice to say it. "I've been meaning to thank you." He stopped again. Even this small gesture felt like pulling teeth. It was an admission that he owed someone, an admission of vulnerability. But Strange deserved to hear it and Loki really *did* want to say it. "For all you've done for me, I mean. Saving my life, healing me. Letting me stay here." He flicked his fingers casually, as though giving words to all of this wasn't much of anything for him. "Allowing me to help you and Wong."

Strange leaned against the doorframe, folding his arms over his chest. "You're welcome," he said, sounding surprised.

With a slight smile, Loki said, "But I suppose you had to save my life. Your Hippocratic Oath."

Chuckling, Strange replied, "Yeah, maybe. But that's not why I did the rest of it." When Loki raised an eyebrow, inviting him to go on, Strange shot him a smile that gave away nothing. "It just so happens that I like you, God of Mischief."

Loki snorted in disbelief. "*That* is very unwise on your part, Strange."

"Maybe." Strange shrugged. "Then again, you can ask Christine—'wisdom' isn't exactly one of my strengths."

"Mm. You must have shown some to be given charge of this place. And the Eye of Agamotto." Loki folded his hands together. "But I suppose I'm very charming. People can't help but like me, usually to their detriment."

Strange smiled again but didn't respond to this. Instead, he turned again to go, but then stopped, looked over his shoulder, and said, "You should come down and eat dinner with me tonight. Wong's at Kamar-Taj. I wouldn't mind the company."

Trying to hide his surprise, Loki gave him a thin smile and said, "Only if you're buying."

With another laugh, Strange said, "You drive a hard bargain...but okay. Mainly because I'm pretty sure you don't have any money." Loki shrugged. Guilty as charged. "Is that a yes?" Strange asked.

Inclining his head, Loki said with a mischievous smile to offset the formality in his tone, "It would be my pleasure to dine with you, Doctor Strange."

There was a flash of happiness in Strange's eyes. Pointing to the door, Strange asked, "Open or closed?"

Loki considered this, then said, "Open."

It was only once Strange had gone that Loki allowed himself to examine this decision, which had been deliberate but had still surprised him. Leaving a door open to other people was something he simply Did Not Do, and even the people he'd loved more than anything in the universe had been shut out much of the time. But he'd just let Strange in, even though he couldn't describe exactly how. It felt uncomfortable but not wrong.

He picked up the book again, ran his finger along the pages at the corner, and settled in to read.

Chapter 8

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



After they ate, Strange suggested they take a walk.

Which was funny, when Loki thought about it, because of all the places he'd been with Strange by now, he'd never thought to explore their immediate surroundings, let alone explore them *with* Strange. So he said yes, cast a spell on himself so that he'd appear forgettable, and followed Strange outside.

The sun was just beginning to dip behind buildings, casting long shadows on the streets of Greenwich Village. Strange had dispensed with his robes and was wearing jeans and a Columbia University sweatshirt. Loki stuck with a suit for his glamor, even though no one would remember him. Shame, really. He looked good in a suit.

As they set off, Loki asked, "So, how *did* you come to learn magic? You said I could hear the whole story if I wanted to." He looked at the sky, rather than at Strange, because this type of directness bothered him. Strange seemed to respond to directness, though.

"Oh yeah, right." Strange ran a hand through his hair. "I guess I should go back to the beginning, huh?"

"Your accident would be fine," Loki said, adding innocently, "unless you feel your childhood's relevant to this story."

With a sardonic smile, Strange said, "Yeah, yeah. And people used to tell me *I* was a stickler for precision." Loki's expression got more mischievous and Strange chuckled, then sobered. "So...car accident. It was bad. Horrible nerve damage. Irreversible, it turned out. Eleven hours on the operating table, steel pins in the bones, et cetera. And after all that—" He held up a hand, demonstrating the tremor. "I didn't deal with it very well. Tried every experimental treatment I could find, had six more operations, used up all my money..." Regret passed over his face. "Pushed everyone away, obviously. And then I had nothing left, so I went to Kathmandu, looking

for a place called Kamar-Taj.” They reached the end of the block and Strange turned right.

Loki knew the name well enough by now. “Clearly you found it.”

“Yeah. Well, it found me.” Strange stepped aside to let a child on a bicycle ride by, then continued, “Mordo saved me from a bunch of thugs and brought me to Kamar-Taj, where I promptly made an ass of myself and got kicked out.”

Mordo. No wonder Strange was so intent on finding him. They had history. Loki didn’t want to comment on it now, though. Smiling with a tinge of sharpness, Loki said, “Surely not. You, making an arse of yourself? I can’t imagine someone of your esteemed nature doing any such thing.”

Strange rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Smartass. Anyway, in the end, The Ancient One agreed to teach me. I decided to use my powers for, you know, the good of the multiverse, instead of healing myself. And here I am.”

With a pointed look towards Strange’s hands, Loki said, “Do you ever regret your decision? You could have been a surgeon again. Instead, you’re—” He waved a hand vaguely, not entirely sure how he wanted to finish that sentence. *Fighting a war we don’t seem to be winning* seemed like the best option, but not quite right for the mood.

Shrugging, Strange said, “I wouldn’t be human if I didn’t have regrets once in awhile.” He paused, then glanced at Loki. “Though I guess that’s not really a trait that’s unique to humans.” Loki snorted but didn’t respond. They passed a bar where people were spilling out the door, drinking on the tiny outdoor patio. Pointing with a thumb towards it, Strange asked, “Want to go in and get a drink?”

Loki shook his head. Far too many people. It reminded him of an Asgardian mead hall, and he wanted to be able to hold a conversation with Strange. “Let’s keep walking.”

Strange waited until they crossed the street, and then he said, picking up the thread of the conversation again, “I don’t regret it, no. I had to figure out what was important, though. And that when you have the chance to help people, sacrifice is worth it.”

Sort of an alien concept, Loki had to admit. Personal sacrifice had never seemed a fair trade-off for him. His stomach twisted and he pushed the thought away. “I imagine you don’t get invited to many galas celebrating your achievements anymore,” Loki said, knowing he was lashing out because of his own hurt, but still unable to stop himself from doing it.

Strange glanced at him, unfazed by Loki’s words. Nothing new there. He couldn’t remember ever managing to annoy Strange. “No, but sometimes I get asked to say a few words at the Kamar-Taj holiday party.” When Loki snorted with surprised laughter, Strange smiled in satisfaction. Then, sobering, he said, “Funny you should say that, actually. I was going to a speaking engagement when I had the accident.” He looked at his hands, then put them in his pockets. “You know what I think about sometimes? I asked Christine to come with me that night.”

“Doctor Palmer?”

“Yeah, sorry.” Strange’s brow furrowed. “I’d like to think I wouldn’t have driven the way I did if she’d been with me, but...” He shook his head. “It wasn’t like I ever listened to her when we were dating. I told her she should’ve had *that* engraved on this watch. ‘You’re going to get yourself killed.’” He pulled a hand out of his pocket and held it up so Loki could see the watch he was talking about, which Loki had noticed and wondered about. The face was shattered and it

obviously no longer worked. “She turned out to be right, though definitely not in the way she thought.”

This conversation was creating more questions. Suddenly, Loki realized that he wanted to know so much more about Strange than he did, and the feeling was startling. He’d had friends over the past few years, but this felt...different. “What does the watch say?” he asked, which seemed like the best way to get more than one question answered at once.

Shakily, Strange undid it as they walked, then held it out for Loki to see. *Time will tell how much I love you, Christine.*

Raising an eyebrow, Loki said, “The two of you are involved, then?”

“Used to be,” Strange said, putting the watch back on.

“But you still wear a token of her affection.”

Strange’s eyes flicked to Loki’s and Loki, out of habit more than any conscious decision, veiled his thoughts behind a pleasant, impossible-to-read smile. “It’s more like a reminder,” Strange said slowly, considering his words. “Of the way I was, and...the capacity for change, I guess. And to value the people who stick with you, even when you push them away.” He shrugged, then glanced at Loki again and said, “Christine was there for me when I didn’t deserve her. But we’re just good friends.”

There was something in his tone that made Loki feel like he was being reassured about this point, but he didn’t examine it too closely. He didn’t need to be reassured about Strange’s romantic status—what, did Strange think he was going to be jealous? Concerned, perhaps, if he were to suddenly show a greater desire to take the night off for a date instead of heading to some far-flung corner of the globe to risk his life. The man was clearly a workaholic, not that it seemed to bother him.

By this time, they’d reached Washington Square Park. The leaves on the trees were still mostly green, but a few of them were beginning to be tinged with yellow. Autumn was on its way, then, though Loki wasn’t actually sure what day it was, or even what month. August? September? It hadn’t mattered before, when Thor and he were fighting off monsters. It still didn’t matter, he supposed, but now that he wasn’t sleeping in abandoned warehouses, it felt like the sort of thing he should know.

When they reached the park’s central plaza, Strange sat down on a bench, and Loki followed suit. There was more he wanted to ask—what had Strange meant, for instance, when he’d said Christine had been right that he was going to get himself killed?

“Anyway,” Strange said, “enough about me.” Leaning back on the bench and cocking his head at Loki, he said, “What about you? Someone must have taught you how to use your magic.”

Loki smiled, though it hurt. “My mother.” Just in case it wasn’t obvious, he added, “She’s dead.”

With a grimace, Strange said, “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No,” Loki said. “It’s fine.” It wasn’t fine, but this was the sort of lie that everyone told. He didn’t hold it against Strange for asking. Fiddling with his sleeve, he said, “My mother was...I don’t even know where to begin.” *She meant everything to me*, was what he was thinking, but saying it out loud felt mawkish. “She was the only person who never made me feel as though I didn’t belong.”

And *that* wasn’t mawkish? Loki blew a puff of air out of the side of his mouth and gave Strange a sidelong look, expecting to see—well, he wasn’t sure exactly what. A modicum of amusement at

his expense, at the very least. But Strange was just watching him, so Loki crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back as well. “On Asgard,” he said, “magic wasn’t considered acceptable for a warrior. Neither was intelligence, for that matter,” he added, rolling his eyes. “But when I was a child, and it was clear I didn’t have Thor’s gifts, my mother saw that I *did* have a gift for sorcery. She taught me. I’ve always assumed Odin didn’t want her to.”

Letting his eyes drift to the opposite side of the park, where a massive triumphal arch led back to the street, Loki said, “She’s the person in *my* life who I didn’t deserve.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Strange lean forward. Hesitantly, he reached a trembling hand out and touched Loki’s leg lightly. “I’m sorry you lost her,” he said.

Loki looked at him and smiled joylessly. “I lose everyone.”

Strange opened his mouth, then closed it, a considering look in his eyes. Finally, he said, “Well. Not to be presumptuous about the depth of this relationship, but—not me.” Loki’s eyebrows shot up and Strange cleared his throat, glancing away, and then he added, “For whatever that’s worth.”

All Loki could do was stare at the side of Strange’s face. Strange’s gaze was studiously focused on the other side of the park, where a yoga class was gate posing. Gods, never mind too much time on Earth, he’d spent too much time in New York, to know that. After several more seconds passed, Loki said, “Not yet.”

When Strange looked back to him, his brow was furrowed. “We’ll have to work on that,” he finally said.

With a snort, Loki asked, “Work on what?”

“Your trust issues. You know, just minor ones.”

Loki laughed softly. “You wouldn’t be the first to try. It’s quite alright, Stephen.” A smile flashed over Strange’s face at this, and Loki felt something ease in his chest that he hadn’t realized had tightened. “They go back too far. I rather think they’re too ingrained at this point.” Cryptic. Whatever had happened between them today, Loki found himself with the urge to be less cryptic, less bottled-up and tight-lipped. “I’m not sure if you’re aware, but I’m adopted.”

Strange raised his eyebrows in surprise, but said, “I thought I’d heard something like that.” Clearly not in surprise at the fact itself, then. Perhaps just that Loki had volunteered the information.

Nodding, Loki said, “I’m not Asgardian by blood. I was abandoned as a baby on one of the other Realms. Jotunheim. Left to die by my biological father.” His eyes narrowed. “I was taken in by Odin and raised to take the throne of Jotunheim. A friendly Frost Giant, who wouldn’t make trouble for Asgard because I would see it as more of a home than Jotunheim itself.” He spat this last part, hating the fact that even though it had never come to pass, it would have worked, had Odin ever come up with a way to break this world-shattering news to him.

Strange remained silent after this. A squirrel scampered towards them, watched them hopefully to see if they’d drop any food on the ground, then ran off again. “*That* part, I didn’t know,” Strange said.

Loki let out an exhale of bitter laughter. “No, I wouldn’t think so. Whatever Thor told the Avengers about my history, I’ve always doubted it was all that detailed. I don’t think he understood the political maneuvering behind my adoption. To him it was simply a good deed by our father.” He’d imagined the conversation between Thor and Odin many times over the years,

how Odin would have glossed over the calculation involved in saving the infant Loki and framed it as an act of mercy. Of *love*. How Thor would have unquestioningly accepted this. At first it had enraged him, that Thor could be so stupid and blind, but now it just made him sad. His brother saw the good in people first. He'd always seen the good in Loki, or at least professed to. Loki had never quite believed that what he was seeing wasn't illusion.

The anger drained out of him and he let his gaze drift over the park, watching families stroll by, couples, people with dogs, people with phones, all of them going about their lives as though they didn't have to worry about an interdimensional soft spot opening up in front of them at any moment and their world being invaded by monsters. That was the beauty of the human condition, he supposed. They lived their lives even when everything was falling apart around them.

Sighing, he said, "There was a time that I schemed to keep Thor off the throne of Asgard because I thought he'd lead us to ruin." To this day, he couldn't decide if he'd been right or just a fool. It was hard not to suspect the latter. His gaze unfocused as he looked over the arch, out over the city and the buildings reflecting the sunset. "It's a great irony that Thor would make a better king of Asgard than our father ever did." He dug his fingernails into his palm. Tenses. He was mixing tenses. "If there was an Asgard left to rule."

An ambulance went by on the street, sirens wailing, and Strange's eyes followed it before he turned back to Loki. "I had a bullshit relationship with my dad, too," he finally said, a note of resigned amusement in his tone that indicated he knew what a feeble way it was to describe the Asgardian royal family's issues.

Loki laughed softly, but genuinely. "I'd guessed that, actually."

"There wasn't quite as much riding on it for me and my dad, though." Strange rubbed at his beard with his thumb, looking, rightly, like he had no idea what to say to all this. Well, he was sitting next to an alien prince who'd once tried to take over this planet, and said alien prince had just opened up to him in a way that he hadn't ever with anyone, except perhaps his immediate family. Not that Strange knew that last part, though Loki thought it should probably be obvious. "Sounds hard," Strange said. "Sounds *really* hard, actually. Especially since you had to do it for...how old are you?"

"One thousand and fifty-two, give or take. I'm not sure how to account for the time traveling." A thin smile tugged at Loki's mouth. "Does this mean you sympathize with me for my attempted conquering of Earth?"

Why did he do this? Why did he take a moment that was meaningful, that was him connecting with another person on a level that he rarely did, and try to sour it?

Well, he knew *why* he did it. Maybe the question was, how could he *stop* doing it?

Strange snorted. "Not really, sorry. But it makes a little more sense." And Strange surprised Loki then by not withdrawing, by not slamming down the barrier that Loki had been sure was coming. Someone whose duty it was to protect the Earth really shouldn't have been getting close to the likes of Loki, God of Lies. But Strange's demeanor didn't change. There was no shift away, no sudden standoffishness. He remained exactly as he was, leaning back against the bench, relaxed, his hand still on his chin.

They were sitting, Loki realized, close enough that he could feel Strange's body heat.

Then, Strange exhaled slowly. "I understand regrets, though. I guess. You're a god. Your regrets are probably going to be a lot bigger than most people's."

“Who says I regret anything?” Loki said, knowing he sounded surly.

At this, Strange chuckled. “You should give people more credit. Just because you don’t spell it out doesn’t mean it isn’t obvious.”

Loki ran his thumbnail over his fingertips, watching Strange. Then, he snorted softly and said, “I really don’t understand you.”

“You’ve said that.”

“I know. Normally I hate to repeat myself, but I thought this bore saying again.” He paused, then added, “Though, I grew up with Thor, so I had to repeat myself a lot, to be honest.”

Strange shook his head, but he was smiling.

One of these times, Stephen was going to want to talk to Loki about his brother. Thor’s face flickered through his mind, a howl of pain contorting it, and it felt like something was clawing its way out of his chest.

He put a hand to the bench and tightened his fingers around the edge of it, looking at the ground. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Strange shift closer to him, then away, as though he knew better than to push when Loki was caught up in memories and demons.

Then, Loki looked up, flashing Strange a smile. False? Of course. He was good at that. “Anyway. All in the past now, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” Strange said. His brow furrowed and he clearly he wanted to say something else. He didn’t, though. He didn’t push and Loki was immeasurably grateful for that. Instead, he put both of his hands on his legs and allowed silence to lapse between them.

Loki fidgeted with his own fingers before Strange’s hands, with their surgically straight scars, drew his gaze. Strange never looked at the scars, he’d noticed. Was it because he wanted to forget them, or because they didn’t matter to him? An urge came over him to run one of his own undamaged fingers along the length of one of them, from wrist to fingertip, and it was so powerful that he actually closed both his hands into fists to keep from doing it.

They were nice hands, scars or no.

That thought brought him up short and he blinked, then flicked his eyes away. Up, actually, so that they met Strange’s. He still wasn’t sure what color they were. And it was very hard, suddenly, to look away from them.

Then Strange’s eyes shifted to a point behind Loki and his eyebrows drew together. He shot to his feet and hissed something under his breath. Loki stood too, turning so he could see what Strange was looking at. There was a figure in a brown robe hurrying in the opposite direction, out of the park.

Strange swore and started after the figure, almost running straight into a jogger. As he reeled back, Loki caught him and steadied him with a hand on his back. The figure was nearly out of the park by then and Strange took off after him, Loki right on his heels. “It’s Mordo,” Strange said. Unnecessary. Loki had figured that no one else would elicit this reaction from him.

Raising a hand, fingers glowing green, Loki asked, “Should I stop him?”

“No,” Strange said sharply.

They reached the street. The robed figure was on the other side already. Cars were speeding by and Strange made a series of motions with his hands. The space around them fractured into planes, and Strange swung an arm so that the road to either side of them, and the cars coming towards them, went straight up into the air at a ninety degree angle.

On the other side of the street, Strange circled his arm again and the fractals fell away as if they'd never been there, matter folding back to the way it had been. Loki had already read about the mirror dimension in the Sanctum's books, but the reality was something else entirely.

"Mordo!" Strange yelled.

The figure paused, turned to look over his shoulder, then took one step to the side and disappeared into thin air. After another second, Strange and Loki reached the spot the figure had vanished. Loki sent out a spell, probing the area. "He must have crossed over into another dimension," Loki said. "But there's no soft spot here. I've never seen anyone do that." Well, except him, with the Tesseract, but he was quite sure Strange's friend Mordo didn't have one of those.

"Damn!" Strange ran a hand through his hair and glared at the spot Mordo had disappeared into. Loki put his hands on his hips and watched Strange, until he said, "I have to go to Kamar-Taj and tell Wong." Looking at Loki, he said, "The Sanctum will let you back in."

Loki's eyebrows shot up and he nearly asked, *It will?*

But before he'd decided if he wanted to, Strange opened a portal and stepped through it, saying as it closed, "Sorry to cut our walk short."

Loki stuck his hands in his pockets and sniffed, an eyebrow quirked, as orange sparks flared across the sidewalk. People walked by as he stood there watching, none of them giving him a second glance. Then, with a shrug, he headed back to the Sanctum. Which would apparently let him in. Interesting.

The Sanctum seemed quieter than normal and Loki found himself stalking from floor to floor, prowling amidst the cases of the Chamber of Relics, not sure what he was looking for but knowing he wasn't going to find it. The feeling wasn't unfamiliar.

Finally, when it was long dark outside and hours had passed, he stopped his pacing and decided to go to bed. Had he been waiting for Strange's return? Pathetic. On his way back to the stairs, he glanced into the chamber that contained the doors leading to the other Sanctums. All was quiet.

He had just reached the stairs when he heard a door open, and then, suddenly, Strange was at his side, appearing out of thin air. Loki had learned weeks ago not to jump when Strange teleported, so he just straightened up and met Strange's eyes.

"We don't know where he went," Strange said.

Loki wrinkled his nose. "I'm sorry. If he's lurking around here though, it's only a matter of time until you corner him."

Strange's gaze was distant as he said, "Yeah. That's what I'm worried about." There didn't seem to be anything more to say on the subject, so Loki turned to go down the stairs to the second floor.

"Loki," Strange said, wrapping his fingers around Loki's shoulder. Loki faced him again and raised an eyebrow. Strange pulled his hand away, then stuck both his hands in his pockets, glancing at the ground. There was a small, sheepish smile on his face. "Sorry."

“What in the Nine are you sorry for?” Loki asked. “Leaving? It takes more than that to offend me.” Not necessarily. But true, in this case. “We’re associates, Stephen. Not lovers. I don’t begrudge you looking for your friend.”

An idiotic urge to add, *And even if we were lovers, I still wouldn’t begrudge you that* came over him. He resisted.

“Associates,” Strange repeated, chuckling.

With a shrug, Loki looked away and said, “Whatever you’d like to call it.”

‘Associates’ didn’t come close to describing what this was, Strange was right about that. Loki wasn’t sure if he had the words for it at all. Strange removed a hand from his pocket and waved it. “I appreciate it, but that’s not what I was talking about.” He hesitated. “I’m sorry if things got too personal earlier.”

This wasn’t what Loki had expected. People rarely apologized to him for crossing his boundaries. And to be perfectly honest, half the time Loki didn’t know what his own boundaries were, so he really *shouldn’t* blame them, even though he usually did. “Oh.”

He wasn’t sure what else to say. Yes, they very much *had* been too personal, but somehow, it hadn’t bothered him as much as it should have. “No apology necessary, Strange. Believe me, I have no problem letting people know when they’ve overstepped the bounds of what’s appropriate for our level of familiarity.”

That made Strange smile. “Yeah, I guess you don’t.” But he still looked like he wanted to say something, so Loki remained where he was, eyebrow arched. “I think I just...look, earlier, when you...your magic demonstration.”

“You’re normally far more articulate than this,” Loki said to hide the fact that this had taken him off-guard—and that he wasn’t at all sure he wanted to have a conversation about it.

Strange chuckled. “You definitely don’t let anyone’s ego get too inflated, do you?”

“Well, I try my best not to.” Loki gave him a small smile, which would have to be invitation enough to go on.

“Anyway.” Strange couldn’t quite seem to meet Loki’s eyes. “I’m sure this will just sound ridiculous to you, it’s your magic, you’ve probably experienced something like that before. But I feel like I...know you. Better, I mean, than I did before. Obviously I don’t *know* you know you—wait, it sounds like I mean that in a biblical sense, which I also obviously don’t know you in—”

Loki had to press his lips together to prevent himself from grinning, if not laughing. Without thinking, he put a hand to Strange’s shoulder and repeated, “Strange. No apology necessary.” What he *wasn’t* going to do was admit that no, he’d never felt anything like that either. Let the wizard think feeling such a deep, visceral connection with another person was something Asgardian sorcerers were old hat at. Loki may have shown more of his cards than he was accustomed to doing, but he wasn’t going to show all of them.

There was still a sheepish smile on Strange’s face, but he said, “Guess I’ll stop apologizing, then.”

Another door closed elsewhere in the Sanctum. Wong. Taking a step back, so that he was balanced right at the edge of the stairs, Loki said, “Thank you, though. I appreciate the gesture.”

The two of them looked at each other, and then Strange said, “We have to go to Minneapolis

tomorrow morning. Some of our protections are getting shaky there.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Loki said, smiling with a sarcastic crookedness.

Strange nodded. The smile he offered in return had its own bite in it. “Good-night, Loki,” he said, then teleported away, leaving Loki standing on the stairs alone.

For another moment, he didn’t move. Then, he turned and went to his room to go to bed.

Chapter 9

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



"I have a plan."

Thor cups his hands over his mouth and blows into them, his breath fogging in the air, then rubs his hands on his arms. "Your plans never go the way you say they're going to," he says, his teeth chattering.

Surreptitiously, Loki twitches a finger, creating a shield in the air in front of him that will redirect the heat from their small fire towards Thor. He doesn't need the heat for himself. New York is cold in February, but it isn't as cold as Jotunheim. "Your vote of confidence is, as ever, inspiring, brother," Loki says. "It's better than Get Help, I can promise you that."

"Get Help works every time," Thor says with a grin. When Loki rolls his eyes, Thor adds, "It's because you really sell it."

"As I'm being unceremoniously flung through the air, you mean."

"It's the lead role," Thor says, clearly trying not to laugh. At least he isn't shivering anymore.

Poking the fire with a piece of rebar, Loki says, "Well, sadly, I don't think it would work on Ultimus's soldiers." Though Loki prefers to relegate the humiliation of Get Help to his childhood memories, the unfortunate truth is that they tried it in battle on Ria once, about a hundred years ago, and it worked. "Do you want to hear my plan or not?" Thor raises his eyebrows, inviting Loki to go on, and Loki clasps his hands together, trying not to fidget. "We need to draw Ultimus out. We can't possibly defeat him in that stronghold dimension of his."

A considering look on his face, Thor says, "I agree. But he knows that too. There's no way we'll get him out of there."

"Unless we make it...inconvenient for him to stay where he is," Loki says.

Thor's brow crinkles, then he says, "I already don't like the sound of this."

"Hear me out, at least," Loki says, disgruntled. Thor motions to him and Loki goes on, "We can find a dimension where there's something far worse than him and use the Tesseract to open up a gateway between Ultimus's dimension and that one."

"Loki—"

"We aren't strong enough to defeat him," Loki says, talking over Thor. "We need someone else to do it for us."

"You mean something else," Thor says.

"What if I do?" Loki says defiantly.

Covering his eyes with a hand, Thor says, "Loki, how can the two of us possibly hope to control something that can defeat Ultimus? We could set something terrible loose on Earth. Maybe not just Earth, depending on what it was." When Loki presses his lips together, Thor says, "Oh, Odin's beard, you already have something in mind."

"Of course I have something in mind," Loki says, wrinkling his nose. "It wouldn't be much of a plan if I didn't." He leans forward, his elbows resting on his legs, and holds Thor's gaze, saying, "We don't have to defeat it. Once it's taken care of Ultimus for us, I can use the Tesseract to send it back to where it came from." He pauses, raises his eyebrow, and asks, "Aren't you the least bit curious?"

An exasperated look on his face, Thor says, "No. This is a bad idea." When Loki opens his mouth to object, Thor cuts him off, "I'm sure you think you've thought of every possibility, brother, but no. We can't bring something to Earth that we might not be able to contain."

"I can contain it," Loki insists. "You can contain it." He tries one last gambit, Thor's favorite. "Together, we'll be strong enough." The look Thor turns on him says everything. His brother isn't being taken in by that one. It figures that when Loki finally says it and means it, Thor won't go for it.

"It's too dangerous," Thor says. There's a sternness to his tone, part God of Thunder, part Asgardian warrior, part heir to the throne—but mostly just big brother. Loki turns his head and glares into the darkness that surrounds them, feeling Thor's eyes on him but refusing to look back. There's a long silence, filled by the crackling of the fire, and then Thor sighs and says, "Loki. We'll come up with a different way."

Exhaling harshly, Loki says, "What way? We're losing, in case you haven't noticed. There are more soft spots every week, and they get more and more difficult to close. One of these days the hole will be big enough that we can't close it, and Ultimus will come through with everything he has." His tone grows more desperate. It isn't an act. "Thor, if we don't stop him soon, we won't be able to stop him." He looks back to his brother, his eyebrows drawn together. "We'll be killed, then Earth, and then the rest of the universe."

Thor is silent as he clenches and unclenches a fist. Loki expects Mjølfnir to fly to his hand, but the hammer stays where it is at his side. Finally, he says, "Why don't you tell me what this being is called, then. So I know what I'm trying to talk you out of."

Loki picks up the piece of rebar again and wraps his fingers around it. "Ghaszaszh Nyirh."

Loki woke up, opened his eyes, and fixed them on the ceiling that he'd come to know so well. His

eyes followed a familiar crack. The plaster was yellowed around it, as though there'd been water damage long ago that no one had bothered to fix. There was a pressure behind his eyes, but he blinked it away, pushed his brother's face from his mind, and sat up.

It was early. The light coming in through the window was pale. Loki swung his legs out of bed and padded to the window, opening it a crack to let in the sounds of pigeons, traffic, and a helicopter somewhere nearby. He raised an arm over his head and propped his forearm against the wall, staring out the window. Every morning, it took longer to clear his mind. Absently, he rubbed the hem of his tunic between his fingers.

The dream—memory—had reminded him that he'd suspected for a long time that this battle against Ultimus was a losing one. It was damage control, nothing more. They needed a way to stop this, and so far, Loki hadn't seen that the Masters of the Mystic Arts had one.

He tapped his fingers on the window frame and let out a breath of air. At the edge of his consciousness, the Tesseract prodded him, and he let its energy wash through him, breathing deeply. What else could he do but keep trying?

Well, Strange had said they were going somewhere this morning, so he needed to get ready. He grabbed the bath towel that he kept draped over the bed's wrought iron footboard and headed for the bathroom to shower.

Just as he got there, the bathroom door opened, startling Loki. He hadn't realized anyone was in there. Strange came out in a cloud of steam, then stopped as his eyes fell on Loki. "Oh, hi," he said, sounding, for once, surprised. "Sorry, I didn't know you were waiting out here."

"How disappointing," Loki said, smiling to try to hide the fact that his pulse had, very much without his consent, cranked up several gears. Strange had nothing on except a towel tied loosely around his waist and Loki had to force himself not to stare. "I rather thought you knew everything that was going on in this house at all times," he added, horrified by the effort it took to make his voice come out normally.

"Not quite," Strange said.

His skin was still wet in a few places and that made it harder to look away. Loki locked his eyes on Strange's face, where his damp hair was falling messily over his forehead.

Damn.

He couldn't move forward to go into the bathroom, not while Strange was there. He'd have to go much, much too close to him, and even if Strange couldn't see the way he was staring, he would surely hear the way his heart was hammering, or the blood rushing through his veins, blood which had surely grown much too hot for a Frost Giant's body to contain.

The way he was standing there was growing awkward, though. Strange had to walk past him to get to his room, and Loki had to walk past him to get into the bathroom. But suddenly all he could think about was what it would feel like to run his palms over Strange's chest and for a human sorcerer, he had...quite the body...who would have thought that under that robe, his biceps and pectorals were that chiseled...

Strange's eyes narrowed and he asked, pointing with a thumb over his shoulder towards the bathroom, "Were you going to go in here?"

The towel slipped, revealing the barest curve of pelvis, of the lines that would lead straight down to

—well.

Loki was glad he'd slept in the sweatpants.

Smiling easily—because at least he was adept at *that*, hiding what was going on in his own head—he said, “Yes. Just waiting for you to move, Strange.”

Strange rolled his eyes and took an exaggerated step to the side so Loki could pass by. And once he had, and shut the bathroom door behind him, then locked it for good measure and cast a spell on it to make sure that lock wouldn't be undone, he leaned back against the door and scrunched his eyes shut, breathing out in a slow, sustained exhale. The towel fell out of his hands and landed on the floor in a heap.

On the backs of his eyelids, he could still see Strange, chest bare, towel slipping.

Shit.

The deep breathing wasn't helping. He was aching now and the temptation to do something about it was overwhelming. He couldn't unsee Strange, couldn't stop thinking about him, and the fact that he'd be back in his room now, probably naked—

Also not helping.

Somehow, he forced himself to keep his hands flat against the door. Self-control. He had that, right? Some? Possibly?

And gradually, he was rewarded for it. Perhaps 'rewarded' wasn't the right word. Alright, he proved to himself that he could see his...comrade? Acquaintance? Roommate? Friend? *Associate*? That he could see the human wizard mostly unclothed for all of forty-five seconds and *not* have to get himself off because of it. This felt like something that shouldn't have required so much effort. What the hel was happening to him?

He swallowed. Strange, he realized, was like no one he'd ever met. Certainly no mortal he'd ever met. There was the magic, obviously. But it was more than that. It was the way he treated Loki. From the moment they'd met, Strange had approached him as though he had no baggage.

No, that wasn't it, exactly. It was more that he *accepted* the baggage, wasn't personally affected by it, and shrugged it aside. Loki was a god and Strange didn't care. It was neither a joke to him nor anything special. Loki had tried to rule Earth and Strange accepted that he'd changed and tried to do good to make up for it. From the day Loki had woken up here, Strange had let him be who he wanted to be—who Loki thought, in his better moments, that he could be.

Shit.

Shit.

Abruptly, he wished that this particular ache *could* be solved with a few minutes and a hand. He knew *exactly* what was happening here and he didn't like it. Putting a hand to his forehead, he blew a breath out slowly through his mouth, staring at the opposite wall without seeing it. Stephen Strange. How had he let himself feel this way about Stephen Strange? This was the absolute last thing he needed. Making friends, that was one thing. But this, *this* was something else, something he wasn't prepared for.

How could he be such a fool?

In his mind, he saw Strange again. *Stephen*. Not only the sight he'd just been treated to, but his hair falling over his forehead, his eyes that could have been blue, could have been green, his sharp smile and sharper intelligence, his magic and his sarcasm and his humor. His scarred, trembling hands, which Loki wanted nothing more right then than to kiss, one finger at a time.

Oh no.

His chest hurt, which at least was a distraction from the ache between his legs. He needed to get ready, and then he needed to go out there, go to Minneapolis with Strange and Wong, and pretend that he didn't feel this way.

What had Strange said to him on the day he'd woken up here? He'd been advised against bringing Loki back to the Sanctum. He'd never made it clear who had advised him against it, but Loki, over the intervening weeks, had put two and two together. There was a reason Loki had never been brought to the other Sanctums or Kamar-Taj. The other Masters didn't know he was here. Only Wong was privy to the knowledge. Loki had a feeling that even more objectionable to the Masters than the God of Mischief's presence at one of their strongholds would be the God of Mischief seducing one of their own.

Granted, that assumed Strange was open to seduction, which was rather a leap to make.

'Seduction' wasn't the right word for it, either. Loki had been the exact opposite of smooth just now. The sight of Stephen's bare skin had turned him into a stuttering idiot.

He sucked in a deep breath and tried not to think the words 'Stephen,' 'bare,' and 'skin' in the same sentence. It was too easy to go from that to an image of Strange and all that bare skin on top of him, or under him, or against the wall, and—

He grit his teeth. And that was the absolute last thing that he should be thinking.

For good measure, as he turned on the water in the shower, he kept it cold. It might not help, but it certainly wouldn't hurt.

Chapter 10

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



Loki, Strange, and Wong stepped through the portal into an empty building, one cavernous room that was mostly carpeted except where tiled walkways bisected it. As Strange closed the portal behind them, Loki looked around the darkened room. There was a disassembled pile of shelving on the floor next to them. Usually they ended up in a place like this when Strange or Wong opened a portal—shuttered stores, abandoned warehouses, buildings that were empty for one reason or another. New Yorkers were inured to the sight of the two Masters popping out of thin air, but apparently it wasn't something that they wanted to force on the blissfully unaware denizens of the rest of the New York Sanctum's protection zone.

"How early do you think the food trucks show up?" Wong asked, putting a hand on his stomach.

Strange fiddled with his sling ring, standing still with his head cocked, as though he was listening for something. Or perhaps feeling for something. His forehead crinkled and then he glanced at Wong, saying, "Maybe you should just get breakfast in the skyway." Motioning to them, Strange headed for a wall and said, "Come on. There should be a hallway on the other side of this."

He held out an arm to call up another portal, but Loki said, "Oh, let me. I'm getting rusty." Smirking at the confused looks on their faces, he put a hand to the wall and pushed magic between the molecules of the material. It was flimsy stuff; he could do this in his sleep. Green light flowed from his palm over the wall and it rippled like water. Extending an arm, Loki said, "After you, gentlemen."

Wong and Strange glanced at each other and the Cloak floated off Strange's shoulder's to poke a corner at the wall. It passed through as though there was no barrier, seemed to give the sentient-article-of-clothing equivalent of a shrug, and flew back to settle itself on Strange. Wong shrugged too and stepped through the no-longer-solid wall. As Strange went to follow him, he glanced at Loki and said, "You're full of surprises, aren't you?"

"You have no idea, Strange," Loki said with a smile that could have meant any number of things.

When Loki stepped through the wall and let it solidify behind him, he found himself standing in a hallway. People were hurrying by, most of them on their phones or with headphones stuck in their ears, and though they stared a few moments longer at Strange, Wong, and Loki than was strictly polite, their eyes quickly darted away. They weren't really looking at him, Loki supposed. Wearing his glamor had become second nature by now. He was simply a third, uninteresting person with two...eccentric men.

The three of them started walking, Strange leading them through a maze of interconnected walkways between the city's buildings. It reminded Loki of a planet he'd been to once. Contraxia? No, somewhere else, some Nova planet that their mother had taken them to as children, which Loki could no longer remember. Krylor, Aakon, maybe both? It didn't matter, he supposed. Sometimes it felt unlikely that he'd ever see such places again.

As they walked, Strange circled an arm and a ring of orange magic looped around his wrist. It was some kind of detection spell that was tied to the protective magic the Masters planted at strategic locations around major cities. It alternately pulsed brighter or sputtered weakly, and in the spots that the light dimmed, Strange and Wong would strengthen their spells.

It had seemed to Loki, over the past several weeks that he'd been accompanying them, that there were more and more weak spots.

These types of excursions seemed to be taking longer and longer, too. The hushed conversations between Strange and Wong got more frequent, the mutters of, "We did this one last time," were happening more often. By the time the sun set that evening, the three of them were all mentally drained. When they stopped for dinner at a food truck, Loki leaned against the side of it, his arms crossed over his chest, gazing out over the expanse of asphalt parking lot.

After a moment, Wong joined him, eating a taco covered in kimchi. He handed Loki another basket and said, "Better eat. We're not done yet."

"So I gathered," Loki replied, picking at the tacos. He wasn't that hungry. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he'd been hungry. He ate because he had to.

Strange paid and came over to stand with them. He looked exhausted. Loki wished he could do more to help him. His magic wasn't really of the protective variety, though. Maybe it was something he could teach himself. Invent, more like.

He picked up a piece of cabbage between his fingers and popped it into his mouth. Well, why couldn't he invent something? He was intelligent enough. While his mother had taught him everything she knew, there were things that she *hadn't* known, which he'd taught himself. He could do so again.

Looking drawn, Strange gazed into the distance while Loki surreptitiously watched him. After a second, Loki flicked his eyes towards the sunset, squinting into the light and probing at his own magic. Undepleted. He could be doing much more to help. Looking back to his companions, he asked, "Where to next, Strange?"

Strange swallowed a mouthful of taco and sighed. "More of the same."

The loop of magic at his wrist flickered, then went out. Strange froze, his taco halfway from the basket to his mouth, and said, "*That's* not good." He hit his wrists together, causing orange sparks to sputter, but the circle didn't reappear.

Without a word, Wong shoved his food into Loki's hands and turned, casting a spell that appeared

in the air in front of him as a spinning mandala, then dissipated in lines of orange that snaked away along the ground and disappeared. A few people standing around the food truck noticed this happening and stared, not that Strange or Wong took any notice of this. Nor would they have cared if they had.

Twenty or thirty seconds passed, and then the lines of magic returned to Wong, snapping back into the mandala he'd initially summoned. Not all of them came back.

Strange and Wong exchanged a look. "We need to split up," Wong said.

"What we *need* is to be in five places at once," Strange said, tossing his mostly uneaten taco in the trash.

"Should we try to call in help?"

"No, there's no point. If we're dealing with this here, then they're dealing with it everywhere. *Shit.*" He rubbed at his eyes. "We have to find out where else it's happening. I'm going to have to start using the stone to go back—"

Wong shook his head. "You know you can't."

Blowing out a hard breath of air, Strange said, "Yeah, yeah. I know. The natural order. Don't worry, I take it more seriously than you think I do."

For a moment, it looked like Wong might smile. A trick of the light, perhaps. His face as expressionless as ever, he said, "I already know you do." He glanced over his shoulder. "So we split up. Do you want the Asgardian?"

This time, Loki was *sure* Wong was almost smiling as he gave Loki a sidelong look. Loki just raised his eyebrows.

And it was idiotic, but when Strange looked at him and said, "Yeah, I want him," a shiver went up his spine. Wong regarded Strange, looking thoughtful, before he nodded, opened a portal with his sling ring, and said, "See you later."

"Be careful!" Strange said to his back. A hand appeared through the portal in acknowledgement, and then the circle closed.

Strange and Loki looked around. The gathered crowd was gawking and Strange sighed, then muttered, "Christ, I get tired of explaining this to people."

"So don't," Loki said.

Rubbing his thumb over his sling ring, Strange murmured, "That's terrible PR." Then, shrugging, he opened a portal, jerked his head at Loki, and said, "Let's go." As they stepped through it into a marsh, he added, "No one ever accused me of having good bedside manner, anyway."

Loki swatted at a mosquito on his neck. "I'm stunned by that revelation." As he shifted his foot, it sank several inches into the mud. Disgusting. Pulling it out with a squelch and shaking muck off his boot, he asked, "What was that spell that Wong did?"

There was silence as Strange stood there, his head cocked. Then, he nodded to himself and set off through the cattails and grass. "It pings all our pylons," Strange said. This was the magical edifice that kept all their other protective spells in any given location functional. "Those lines that didn't come back? Those pylons failed."

“All at once?” Loki said to Strange’s back.

The only sound was birdsong and the whine of mosquitos. Eventually, though, Strange said, “All at once.”

Soon they came to a grassy tussock poking out of the marsh by a few inches. Strange made a shape with his hands, then whirled them and cast a spell that Loki had only seen a few times. A glowing mandala appeared on the ground in front of them, looking like it was branded into the grass. It reminded Loki of the mark the Bifrost left on the ground. As he looked more closely at it, he could see that there were pieces missing from the pattern, as though someone, or something, had hacked away at it.

Loki glanced at Strange, who swiped at the hair falling over his forehead. “I don’t know what did this,” the sorcerer muttered. He cast another spell, but it didn’t seem to do anything. There was a worried look on his face. “It’s like…” he began, trailing off.

When he didn’t continue, Loki prompted, “Like what?”

Strange shook his head. “Like…it fell apart.” He let out a slow breath and the trepidation in his eyes grew darker. “Shit. I wonder…” Closing his eyes, he let out a huff of air, then cast another spell. Even though Loki had only seen him do it once, he recognized it right away. The amulet on Strange’s chest opened, bathing his hands in green light, and a loop of green magic twined around his arm. His eyes narrowed in concentration, he held out his hands and turned one of them counter-clockwise.

Around them, time moved backwards. Loki understood suddenly that *that* was what the Eye of Agamotto was. It controlled time.

He watched insects fly backwards, a heron stilt past in reverse, an otter slip hindquarters first into the water. Then, the symbol on the ground in front of them flickered and became whole. Strange slowed the backwards wind of time, then stopped it and turned his hand clockwise. The world snapped back to normal, everything happening the way it was supposed to. Loki understood that Strange had just rewound time to before the pylon had been damaged, so he could see what had done it.

Loki tensed, summoning his knives to his hands. Just in case.

Nothing happened. The marsh was full only of the sound of insects, frogs and toads, and the wind in the grass. No threat appeared.

Then, there was—something. The air seemed to press around Loki, and he had to struggle to take a breath, even though nothing had changed.

No, that wasn’t true. The marsh had gone completely quiet.

Loki looked around, then let his gaze return to the hillock in front of them. There was a flicker, and then something…happened. It was like someone had slipped a piece of glass between him and what he was looking at, a piece of glass shot through with cracks and a tint of color that he couldn’t identify. He squinted as ghostly shapes appeared in front of him. A deer which he hadn’t seen walk past, a bird that swooped out of nowhere and then vanished. A plane in the sky, which flew into his field of vision, but reached a certain point and then disappeared.

He looked down at the mandala on the ground. Pieces of it were flickering in and out of existence. And then, suddenly, what was happening stopped, leaving the pylon broken.

Strange put a hand to his chin, rubbing at his beard with a thumb and looking troubled. Then, he held out his arms again, speeding time forward until they returned to the moment they'd left. Loki watched, vanishing his knives. He didn't think he was going to need them. Yet.

Neither of them spoke. Then, Loki said, "Forgive me for saying so, but *that*, whatever it was, seems like something you don't know how to fix." He didn't know what had just happened, and it wasn't clear that Strange did either.

"I can't really blame you for pointing out the obvious," Strange said, still staring at the pylon.

In a different situation, Loki might have smiled and said that a penchant for bluntness was something Strange possessed in abundance. It would have been, Loki realized, flirty. Gods, he'd been flirting with the man for weeks, hadn't he?

Not the time. Of course, the universe was falling apart, so there might not ever *be* a good time to deal with this. Maybe that was for the best. In fact, Loki was sure it *was* for the best. Pushing down his desires wasn't exactly what he'd call fun, but he was experienced with it. Among other unrequited passions, he'd spent decades wishing the Lady Sif would see him as more than Thor's weedy, not-quite-trustworthy little brother.

Sif. Fandral, Hogun, Volstagg. Heimdall. Everyone he'd ever known, gone. If there were still Asgardians out there somewhere, Loki would never see them. Standing there in that marsh, swatting at mosquitos, it suddenly hit him, with a clarion, ringing certainty, that he would never leave Earth again.

Loki looked at Strange, standing there with his trembling hands and his unwavering attempt to do what was right and to fix everything. For someone whose moral compass had badly malfunctioned in the past decade, he certainly had a tendency to grow attached to people whose desire to do good was steadfast to an absurd degree. Still, if his time on Earth was spent in the company of this man, he couldn't complain.

With a hiss of air, Strange put his hands out again, this time making a different series of motions. His eyes slitted and the mandala that formed in front of him seemed to fight him, each sequence of the spell grinding into place agonizingly slowly. Finally, though, it spun, complete, and was drawn into the mandala burned onto the ground, which knit itself back together.

Strange dropped his arms with a gasp. Sweat beaded his forehead. Loki took a step forward and gripped his shoulder. "Are you alright?" he asked.

Reaching up, Strange grabbed Loki's arm, like he needed to steady himself. "Yeah," he finally said, breathing heavily. "I'm fine. Or I will be, at least."

Loki's fingers tightened on Stephen's shoulder. "Teach me how to do that spell," he said. When Strange looked at him in surprise, he said, "You said five pylons failed. What if they're all as taxing as this one?" His brow furrowed. "I don't think this planet—or the universe, for that matter—can afford for you to kill yourself doing this."

"Aw, and here I thought you were just worried about me," Strange said sardonically, still holding onto Loki's arm.

He just gave Strange a thin smile.

After another minute, Strange released his hold on Loki and straightened up. "I appreciate the concern—and the offer—but it's not a simple spell. I'd need time to teach you, and we don't have

it.”

“Then draw on my magic,” Loki said. When Strange gave him a surprised look, he said, “I used to do it with—” Something sharp stabbed through his heart and he stopped, then tried again, “I can channel my magic to you.”

Strange still looked speechless, but finally he asked, “What makes you think your magic is even compatible with mine?”

With a shrug, Loki said, “Just a feeling.”

There was another silence. Suddenly, it seemed that the trill of toads was deafening. Loki hadn’t even noticed it until now. The light was fading fast, too. It was the end of a long day and Strange was visibly spent. Wong probably wasn’t feeling any better. “Let me help you,” Loki said, more urgently.

Smiling wryly, Strange said, “Okay, okay.” He held Loki’s eyes. “Thanks.” Loki belatedly removed his hand from Stephen’s shoulder and Strange’s eyes flicked to it. Then, he rolled his shoulders back, adjusted his sling ring, and opened a portal. “Next pylon,” he said, motioning to Loki to step through.

Darkness fell while they were repairing the next pylon, located along the side of a freeway. With traffic whooshing by, Loki wove a net of magic to siphon his power through. There was no way to tell each other what needed to be done, so they had to rely on vague descriptions and the feel of magic thrumming through the air. The next one, in a mall parking ramp, went faster, and at the end of it, Strange didn’t look quite so exhausted. He cast the spell to test the strength of each pylon, and each line of magic came back.

Strange leaned against the wall, painted powdery purple, in the parking ramp. “I guess that means Wong managed to fix the other two,” he said. He ran a hand through his hair and turned to Loki. “Listen—”

Then, he stiffened. No need to ask him why, because Loki could feel it too. Quickly, Strange pulled a phone out and sent a text. A portal opened and Wong appeared. At the bemused look Loki was giving them, Wong pocketed his own phone and said, “What? Did you think we communicated via telepathy?”

Loki snorted and replied, “Clearly I need to adjust my expectations for your mysticism.”

The three of them turned to face the disturbance they all could feel. A fluorescent light buzzed overhead, flickering. The air in front of them rippled and both Wong and Strange pulled up mandalas. This was Loki’s forte though. A soft spot was opening, and he was the one that could close it.

Holding up a hand to wave them back, Loki said, “I’ve got this.”

He planted his feet on the concrete and called up a spell, green magic flowing from his fingertips. This soft spot was already bigger than any of the others he’d closed and a tendril of trepidation coiled through him. Narrowing his eyes, he ignored the feeling and began weaving the soft spot closed.

It expanded.

Loki’s eyes widened and he froze, then doubled down on his spell, strengthening the bands of green with iron and looping them across the soft spot. But it didn’t do any good, and the air rippled

again as it grew larger.

“Loki...?” Wong said.

The soft spot was—it was *fighting* him. Loki grit his teeth and set his will, shifting onto the balls of his feet and digging them into the ground. This wasn’t right. This was different.

“What’s wrong?” Strange asked.

But Loki just shook his head and slitted his eyes, bracing himself mentally against the force pushing against him. Energy pulsed back at him and he beat at it, green sparks sputtering off his fingers. The soft spot widened further, blackening around the edges. Loki had never seen *that*. It expanded, clawing at the air around it, snapping off Loki’s magical bindings one by one. He snarled, baring his teeth, and threw more around it, trying to thread it closed.

Energy crackled out of the soft spot and Loki felt it pulse again, then bulge at the space around it. His magic stretched taut and hit its limit, and Loki felt something behind the soft spot, an explosive pressure that suddenly he knew he couldn’t contain.

His eyes widened and he whirled, throwing a swathe of magic out behind him as he yelled, “Get down!”

The spell he’d cast knocked Strange and Wong off their feet just as power exploded out of the soft spot.

Loki dove for the ground, throwing himself out of range. A wave of black, gut-churning energy passed over him, ripping at his nerves and sending serrated spikes of pain through his jaw and teeth and straight into his brain. Without thinking, he cast a shielding spell over Strange and Wong. He was a god, he could take this. The humans couldn’t.

Scrambling to his feet, Loki took several steps back, holding his hands out and casting a complicated series of spells. He barely knew what he was doing, stringing magic together, looping enchantments in chains to bind and protect and put a stop to whatever was happening. Green light flared out from his palms and hit the soft spot. Or—whatever it had become.

It was black now, practically ultraviolet, and oozing something. Loki twisted a hand and his shielding spell closed over it. This wasn’t a solution, but it would do until they found one.

He took another step back and offered a hand to Strange, who took it. Loki closed his fingers around Strange’s wrist to make up for the weakness of his grip.

“Thanks,” Strange said, meeting his eyes and giving Loki one swift nod.

Behind them, Wong said, “Don’t worry about me, I’m fine.” As he joined them, brushing off his robe, he added, “Now what?”

The soft spot shimmered and Loki took a step forward, staring hard at it. If he squinted, he almost thought he could see something on the other side of it. A city? It almost looked like...like Asgard.

He stepped forward, passing his hand through his own shielding spell, and reached for the soft spot.

“Don’t,” Strange said sharply, grabbing Loki’s arm and pulling him back. They touched along the full length of their bodies and a frisson of searing heat went through Loki. When Strange let go of his arm and shifted away, it wasn’t the sight in front of Loki that kept him rooted to the spot. His

arm was tingling where Strange had wrapped his fingers around it, and he was acutely aware of Strange at his back, though there was now enough space between them that any body heat he thought he could feel was just his imagination.

This was fine. This was tremendous. The world was burning and he was more concerned with the fact that a mortal wizard had touched him and it had made him feel...things. With Strange standing there, inches behind him, it was impossible not to remember what he'd looked like wearing nothing but that towel.

He needed to concentrate. Looking back to the soft spot, he asked, "Can you two see that?"

"I see a problem," Wong said.

Strange stepped forward. "This is new," he said, and Loki glanced at him, raising an eyebrow. After a pause, he asked, "What do you see?"

Looking back to the soft spot, shining with an uncanny pearlescent black, Loki said, "I thought I saw..." *Home*. "...never mind. Just a trick of the—er, light."

"There's a city," Wong said in a low tone.

"Not just a city," Strange said, crossing his wrists to call up two orange shields, which he held out in front of him.

There was a figure coming towards them, shimmering through the portal's black sheen. Orange discs appeared on Wong's hands as well, and Loki summoned his knives, holding them ready.

The figure came closer, robed and hooded, and stepped through the portal. At Loki's side, Stephen stiffened, and Wong murmured, "No..."

For their sake, Loki hoped they were wrong about who they thought this was. But then the figure reached up and pushed its hood back. Strange made a noise and dropped his arms to his sides, his shields dropping with them.

"Mordo," he said.

Chapter 11

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



No one moved.

Loki reached for Stephen's shoulder and gripped it. "Strange, that isn't your friend," he muttered. Strange ignored him, stepping forward, so Loki tightened his grip on his shoulder and pulled him back. "Listen to me," he hissed. "You know I'm right."

Mordo's eyes were oil-slick black. His gaze shifted from Strange to Loki. "You've made a new friend, I see, Stephen," he said.

His voice grated on Loki's ears. There was something wrong about it.

Hesitantly, Strange held out a hand to the other sorcerer. "Karl," he said. "Let us help you."

Mordo laughed and all three of them flinched at the sound. Nails on a chalkboard. Metal against metal. The darkness of another dimension. "Help me?" he asked. "I'm not sure what your help is *worth*. I've seen you upend the natural balance with my own eyes, and yet now you profess to be dedicated to it. Or are you?" His gaze found the Eye of Agamotto, then moved to Wong. "I'm disappointed in you, old friend," he said.

"The feeling is mutual," Wong said.

Strange held out a hand again. "Look, whatever Ultimus has promised you, it's a lie. C'mon, Karl, you want to talk about upending the natural balance? He's destroying this universe. You know that. I *know* you know that."

The other sorcerer's black eyes flicked to Loki, who shifted his grip on his daggers. "Do you know what I came to realize, Stephen?" Mordo said conversationally. "After we learned of The Ancient One's betrayal? I realized that what this planet has—" He took a step forward. "—is too many sorcerers. Somehow, I'm not surprised you've taken up with one of the spares." His mouth curved

in a hard smile. “I come with a message, Loki of Asgard. Your sister Hela can’t wait to meet you.”

Loki bared his teeth and tensed, but a warning look from Strange kept him in place. With another laugh, Mordo said, “Oh, Stephen, you’ve tried so hard, haven’t you? And you don’t even know. You don’t even realize—your problem is right in front of you. Or should I say, it’s standing next to you.” Both Strange and Wong looked at the only natural place *to* look after a comment like this: at Loki, standing between them, at their sides. Mordo’s expression slackened, then his face seemed to undulate, like something under the skin was trying to break free. His hands twitched and his neck jerked, but then he looked at Strange again. “The bill comes due,” he said. “The natural order has been destroyed, and the bill comes due.”

Behind him, the portal flickered and changed. Neither Strange nor Wong seemed to notice, but Loki did, watching as Asgard and the Bifrost vanished into blue-tinted darkness, swirling snow, and a ruined city.

And something else.

Loki’s eyes widened and he snarled, “We need to move, *now!*”

There was a roar, and with a blast of icy wind, a Jotunheim Frost Beast hurtled out of the portal. It landed with a crunch in the parking ramp, its clawed feet digging into the concrete and gouging deep furrows in it.

Loki, Strange, and Wong dove out of the way. Loki landed on his shoulder and rolled, coming to his feet with his daggers in his hands, as though they were going to help against a Frost Beast. He well remembered the destruction one of these things had wreaked on its own homeworld during that disastrous trip to Jotunheim all those years ago; the mayhem it could cause here was immeasurably worse.

Of course, he could worry about that later. Right now, he just needed to concern himself with surviving the thing’s attack on him and his friends.

Friends. What a time to realize it.

The Frost Beast roared again and charged Strange and Wong. Loki flung a blast of magic at it. It would do nothing to hurt it, but perhaps it would annoy it enough so that it turned away from the Masters and allow them to find their feet.

The animal’s head swung and it caught sight of him, its nostrils flaring. Loki held out his arms in invitation. Really, it was a shame that his Frost Giant heritage hadn’t seemed to come with any useful powers, besides the ability to use the Casket of Ancient Winters. He would *very* much appreciate having some sort of homeworld bond with this creature right now.

With a snort, the Frost Beast came towards him, bellowing as it gathered speed. He narrowed his eyes and dodged out of the way, drawing it away from Strange and Wong. As he approached one of the parking ramp’s purple support pillars, he sent an illusion of himself away and ducked behind it. The Frost Beast followed the illusion and Loki pushed his hair out of his face, turning back the way he’d come.

A crack of energy made him jump back. The air sizzled inches from his ear as a flail of golden magic whipped past him. Loki flipped his knives in his hands and faced Mordo, who was holding a glowing staff. “You know my sister, then,” Loki said conversationally.

Mordo spun the staff and sparks flew off of it. “One meets strange bedfellows in the service of

Ultimus.”

Loki thought of his friendship with Strange and Wong.

Friendship probably wasn't the right word to describe what he felt for Strange.

“Or in service of the opposite,” he said, smiling with sarcastic crookedness.

Mordo took a step back, then extended the staff in front of him. “You’ve doomed this universe.”

Loki’s smile got harder. “I’ve heard worse,” he said, then charged Mordo, daggers slashing.

The blades hit the staff, biting into the wood, and Mordo threw him off. He swung it in one hand and the flails appeared from the end of it again. As it cracked through the air, Loki ducked and spun away.

There was a roar and the Frost Beast came thundering back towards them. Its tail whipped out, destroying a pillar. Then, suddenly, ropes of orange magic unfurled, wrapping around the Frost Beast’s legs and neck. Mordo glanced at it and Loki took his opportunity, diving for the other man. Mordo sidestepped him but Loki turned on the ball of his foot in a maneuver that would be impossible for a Midgardian. If Mordo knew Loki’s sister, then he should know—Asgardian gods were more agile than any human, even if they weren’t Asgardian by birth.

He sunk a blade into Mordo’s shoulder and shoved him hard into the pillar, hearing a crack of bone as his head slammed into the concrete. Then, he pulled the knife out, blood spraying off it, and ran for Strange and Wong to help them with the Frost Beast. When he got there, Strange looked at him and said fiercely, “I have to help him.”

The Frost Beast lunged and Loki raised his hands, weaving magic through the air to slow it. He glanced over at Mordo, who by all rights should be dead. There was blood on the ground, running from the back of his shattered skull, but Mordo was pushing himself to his feet.

Looking back to Strange, he said, “Stephen, listen to me. His mind is *gone*. You can’t save him.”

“What are you suggesting?” Strange said, his voice tight with the strain of holding the Frost Beast.

On the other side of the parking ramp, Mordo had regained his feet. Loki sighed. “I suppose you don’t want him dead.” The expression on Strange’s face was answer enough.

The Frost Beast bellowed and snapped its bonds, and Mordo was coming towards him, whipping the staff in his hands in a circle, so that the flails were a deadly blur of golden light. The three of them fell back and more ropes of magic shot from Strange’s and Wong’s hands, attaching to the ceiling and floor, stretching from column to column.

“Fine,” Loki said, an idea solidifying in his mind. “Would one of you mind using your sling ring to allow me to—what’s the expression? Get the jump on him?”

Despite everything, a sardonic smile twitched at Strange’s mouth, and he did as Loki asked.

Loki stepped through the portal and appeared next to the other sorcerer, who jumped back and snarled in surprise. “I’d just like to say, Mordo,” he said, extending a hand and gripping the man’s arm. “I’ve heard *so* much about you, I wish I could say it was a pleasure to finally meet.”

Mordo’s mouth opened in surprise, his black eyes widening, but Loki was already holding the Tesseract. A black portal opened behind him and Loki shoved Mordo. The man yelled in surprise

and fear as he fell backwards into the portal, clouds of blue and black billowing around him.

Then, the portal snapped shut and Loki vanished the Tesseract. He turned and sprinted for the other side of the parking ramp, where Strange and Wong were holding the Frost Beast at bay. “Send it back to Jotunheim!” he shouted, skidding to a stop beside them.

The Frost Beast roared and snapped at the magical bonds holding it. If Loki could have used the Tesseract to send it away, he would have, but that would have required getting close enough to touch it, and he didn’t fancy getting torn apart tonight. Not, at least, here, on level six of the East Mall of America parking ramp. Perhaps another time.

Strange narrowed his eyes, his jaw working as he struggled to wrap more bonds around the Frost Beast, but he glanced at Loki and said, “Yeah, great idea, except I can’t open a portal to a place if I have *no idea where it is*.”

“Oh, is that all,” Loki said, the nonchalance in his tone losing a little something, considering how hard he was breathing. His hand shot out and he pressed his fingers to Strange’s temple. Strange jerked back, but Loki didn’t break the contact. If he couldn’t give the intergalactic coordinates verbally, then the only way was to put the information directly in Stephen’s mind.

Strange blinked, then sucked in a breath. “Hold it there for a second, Wong,” he said.

“What do you think I’ve been doing?” Wong demanded.

Strange broke his own spell and extended one arm, while the other spun and his sling ring sparked. A portal opened up beneath the Frost Beast, spinning larger and larger, and then, with a yelp that shook the parking ramp, it fell through. With a twist of his wrist, Strange closed the portal, leaving nothing but a few glowing sparks on the concrete, winking out one by one.

The three of them stood there in silence, their shoulders heaving, before Strange turned to Loki. “Mordo?” he asked, his face and tone betraying nothing.

“I sent him elsewhere,” Loki replied.

Wong’s eyebrows twitched. It was *almost* a facial expression. “Elsewhere?”

A hard smile flitted across Loki’s face. “I don’t imagine either of you have ever heard of a place called Sakaar?” The Masters glanced at each other. “No? Didn’t think so. Suffice it to say, it has a reputation as a dumping ground for all lost things. And your friend Mordo seems *very* lost.”

Strange let out a whoosh of air and ran his hand through his hair, but he didn’t object to this. “You didn’t kill him?” he asked.

Loki met Strange’s eyes. It would have been smart to kill him. But he knew that Mordo meant too much to Stephen. “I didn’t kill him,” he said, inclining his head.

Nodding, Strange said. “Okay.” He hesitated. “Thanks.”

There was no point in repeating that Mordo, the friend that had brought Stephen into the fold of Kamar-Taj, was gone. Perhaps this was something that Strange simply couldn’t accept, at least not consciously. Or perhaps he just couldn’t say it out loud yet.

The portal that Mordo had come through was still open, and Loki turned to face it, sending out a swirl of magic. As he suspected, his spell rolled off it, like water hitting oil. Licking his lips, he said, “I can’t close this.”

Wong stepped forward and cast a spell, which traced around the portal, flickering faintly. “I think this is beyond us, too.” When Strange glanced down at the Eye of Agamotto, Wong shook his head. “Mordo was right about one thing, Stephen. The bill comes due when we violate the natural order. Using the Time Stone will only destabilize this universe further.”

The Time Stone? Loki looked sharply at the two of them and Wong glanced at him, as if he knew what he’d said and had been wondering if Loki would catch it.

Strange made a face and said, “You’re right. But we have to do something about this.”

“We’ll have to bind it.”

“And what, get mall security up here?”

Wong shrugged.

After a second, Strange nodded his agreement to this plan, though ‘plan’ seemed a generous term. Loki arched an eyebrow. “Would you like me to get a mall cop while the two of you do that?”

Strange chuckled tiredly, then said, “If you don’t mind.”

When Loki nodded, Strange brushed a casual hand across his back, then gripped his shoulder. Loki looked at him, then jerked his head once and went to find someone to police tape the area off.

The universe had started to crumble, and this was where it started.

Chapter 12

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



There was no respite. A week passed, and more soft spots opened, more became portals, bound but not closed. There were reports of strange things happening—stranger things, was maybe a better way of putting it—that sounded to Loki very much like what he'd seen in the marsh in Minneapolis. Things that shouldn't be there suddenly appearing, then disappearing. It sounded, to Loki, like another dimension, almost exactly like theirs, overlaying their own and pushing its way in.

Or perhaps it was the other way around, and their dimension was pushing its way into another.

Other things were going wrong. Blackouts for no reason. Harrowing stories of planes hitting pockets of space where everything stopped functioning—phones, computers, tablets. The plane's onboard electrics and the engine. There was a story of a column of water in the Gulf of Mexico, and when a Coast Guard boat was sent to investigate it, the boat and everyone on board was sucked into the column and carried into the atmosphere. Except it wasn't like they were being sucked up by the water, eyewitnesses said. It was more like they were *falling*. As though gravity was working backwards only in that spot.

Loki, Strange, and Wong were run ragged. They slept in shifts, watching the Rotunda of Gateways, listening for requests for help from the other Sanctums. Loki supposed he was eating, but he usually couldn't remember when the last time that he'd done so was. Usually Strange or Wong would have to remind him.

He didn't mind being too busy to think. His dreams were bleeding into his waking moments, and he would find himself so tired that he couldn't stop memories from crowding him, memories that he wasn't prepared to relive.

One night—was it eight days after Mordo and the Frost Beast? Nine?—he was pacing the Rotunda of Gateways, watching this world's myriad environments flashing past silently. Desert to rainforest to mountain peak to prairie to city to suburb to hardwood forest to tundra. A thought snuck into his

mind that he might be coming to love this planet. And that just made him roll his eyes.

“You can get some sleep if you want,” a voice said from the doorway.

Loki turned around. Strange was standing there, arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against the side of the door. With a dismissive flick of his wrist, Loki replied, “My shift isn’t over until six.”

Shrugging, Strange said, “Yeah, but I can’t sleep. And you *don’t* sleep, so I was thinking maybe you should try.” He smiled a little. “That’s my prescription for you. Doctor’s orders.”

With a snort of laughter, Loki said, “I’m afraid I was never very good at following orders, regardless of how well-intentioned they are.”

“Hmph.” Strange pushed off from the wall with a shoulder, then came into the Rotunda. For a moment, he watched the gateways, then he turned to Loki. “Seriously. Are you okay? You don’t sleep, you barely eat.”

Raising an eyebrow, Loki said, “Why do you ask?” His heart had jumped at the concern.

Strange glanced at him. “Oh, you know. Wong’s worried.”

“Ah. Of course. Wong.”

A smile flashed across Strange’s face, a smile which made it hard for Loki to swallow. He was a beautiful man and it was a bit criminal that it had taken Loki so long to notice. He reached out, touching Stephen on the shoulder, wishing he could let his hand linger, imagining what it would feel like to trace his fingers along Strange’s shoulder, up his neck, and into his hair. To run them in the other direction, down his body, inside his clothes, over his bare skin. He still hadn’t forgotten the way Strange had looked mostly naked.

In the long list of all his bad ideas, pursuing Strange wasn’t his worst. But it was still ill-advised. This wasn’t the time for a romantic dalliance, and besides, Strange was *mortal*. Thor falling in love with Jane Foster had been one of his more stupid choices, and Loki had always been disdainful of it.

Then again, perhaps it wasn’t really a choice.

Anyway, Loki wasn’t in *love* with Strange. Obviously. He was...attracted to him. And yes, he woke up thinking about him, looking forward to seeing him. Talking to him was never boring. He was intelligent, he was well-read (for a human, obviously, but that wasn’t his fault), and he was witty. He appreciated Loki’s sense of humor and he made Loki laugh, which was something he desperately needed to do. He understood magic, the thing that had always defined Loki, and which only his mother had ever appreciated.

This wasn’t love, though. Loki would be an idiot to allow himself to fall in love with Stephen Strange, human wizard, who had Loki’s name on a list of possible threats to Earth. They weren’t, to put it lightly, a match made in heaven. Or in hel, for that matter. They’d be a match made on Midgard, and the thought made Loki cringe. Besides, he didn’t even know if Strange liked men. Doctor Palmer was an ex-girlfriend, but there had never been any mention of ex-boyfriends.

But Strange stood close to him, and held his gaze, and told him to get some sleep. He made him eat. He let him be silent, or he let him talk. He let him *be*. And Strange touched him, little, casual, glancing touches, but sometimes, Loki caught something in his eyes that looked very much like the longing Loki felt.

It was stupid. It was *such* a stupid idea. What could he possibly hope for? Here, between them? Loki was the alien who had invaded New York City and Strange was keeping him here unbeknownst to his entire order. Strange's sworn duty was to protect this planet and Loki had once tried to conquer it. Strange was mortal, human, and Loki was a god. There was no future for them.

Of course there wasn't a future. He didn't want a future. He just wanted...

Oh, what? He just wanted to fuck?

Please.

You're such a liar.

He couldn't be in love with Stephen Strange.

Loki glanced at him. Norns, he wanted to kiss him. He'd imagined kissing him. He'd imagined more than that.

But he cut that thought off. No future. No point. Anyway, Loki didn't do relationships. And he felt far too much affection for Strange to simply take the physical pleasure he wanted from him, were Strange to even offer that.

Affection? For heaven's sake.

Finally, Loki said, "I won't sleep. To be honest, Stephen..." He hesitated, always loathe to admit to vulnerability. But Strange had always made him feel like his vulnerabilities weren't something to be ashamed of. With a sigh that was only a little bitter, he said, "To be honest, sleeping brings me no rest. It certainly brings me no peace."

Strange looked at him, looking pained about this, but not pressing the issue. He never did. He never had. That was something to wonder about, but of course, that would require Loki to face certain truths that he didn't want to. "Okay," Strange said quietly. One of his hands came up, shaking as always, almost as though he meant to touch Loki's face.

That was wishful thinking. But he put his hand on Loki's shoulder, and even that amount of contact knotted Loki's stomach. "Keep me company, then?" Strange asked, his tone sardonic, his smile dry. Loki surprised himself by being able to see through it to the fact that Stephen meant it.

Loki shrugged, but didn't move. "I suppose."

Loki almost considers using the Tesseract and going back to Asgard, if only to have access to the library. Of course, that makes a lot of assumptions. One, that any part of Asgard is still standing. Two, that every book in the library hasn't been burned. Three, that Asgard isn't completely overrun by Ultimus's creatures. Four, that Loki isn't too much of a coward to return to Asgard.

That last one is just wishful thinking. He's definitely too much of a coward to return home. Not because he thinks he can't fight his way through Ultimus's hoards, but simply because he can't face his ghosts.

Fine, then. He'll just have to make do with his patchy knowledge of the creature. The Old One. Ghaszaszh Nyirh. He read about the Old Ones centuries ago on Asgard. They'd given him nightmares, actually, and his mother had tutted and told him that the subject could wait until he was older.

He figures, though, that something that gave him nightmares is an appropriate thing to set against Ultimus.

(a bit of lucid dreaming, here. He doesn't yet understand, or doesn't want to understand, what his worst nightmare is)

"You look very thoughtful, brother," Thor says.

Loki interlaces his fingers and pushes his palms back towards himself, cracking his knuckles.

"Oh?" he says.

There's a concert in Central Park that Loki's insisted they attend. He misses music. He misses art. He's slid past ticket kiosks at museums before, glamored to be unnoticeable, but not lately. When he saw a flyer for this concert, he took it and told Thor they were going. Thor, to his credit, indulges this without too much moaning.

Loki has glamored both of them, and it's dark, but they're still sitting at the back of the Great Lawn. The sound isn't good, of course—they're too far from the orchestra, and besides, they're outside, but it makes him feel civilized. After years of what boils down to homelessness, it's a nice reprieve.

It's the intermission now, otherwise Loki would have shushed Thor. He doesn't know the music that the orchestra is playing, but it's nice. For human music, obviously.

Thor leans closer to him. "You're thinking about that thing again, aren't you?"

Loki scowls. For someone who professes to have no interest or talent in magic, Thor certainly seems to be able to read minds at times. "No," Loki lies. When Thor gives him an exasperated look, Loki says, "Maybe, but what do you care? You made it clear you're not interested in my plan."

"I'm not interested in your plan because it will only result in something terrible happening," Thor says. "You, though, are clearly still fixated on it." He lowers his voice further. "Loki, I know you think me an unlearned boor, but I'm not entirely ignorant."

"Shh," Loki hisses. "Don't say my name."

Thor rolls his eyes. "No one's listening."

This is true, but it doesn't mean Loki has to admit it. He crosses his arms over his chest and says, "You've knocked a few points from your boorishness quotient by coming here with me tonight."

With a snort, Thor says, "Thanks."

"Of course, brother," Loki smirks.

Sobering again, Thor says, "I know what that thing is. The thing you want to set on—" He lowers his voice. "—Ultimus." Loki glares at him, but Thor presses on. "You have to stop. We can't do what you want to do. It's an Old One, L—brother. It's madness."

Loki uncrosses his arms and leans back, his palms on the ground, fingers digging into the grass, and doesn't answer. The grass is cool on his palms, but the earth is warm. Looking up at the sky, a dome of washed-out, inky blue with one or two stars outshining the light pollution, Loki says, "Madness may be the only way we defeat him."

With a sigh, Thor says, "We can't." When Loki still doesn't look at him, Thor says, "Loki." This

gets him the response he wants, which is eye contact, even if it comes in the form of a glare. "Promise me you'll stop thinking about it. Promise me you won't put this plan of yours into action."

Loki purses his lips and flexes his fingers.

"Brother." Thor gives him a beseeching look. "Please."

Finally, Loki sighs. "Fine," he says. The orchestra begins to tune their instruments again. He looks away. "I promise."

Of course, he had to sleep. And that was what he got for it.

Loki rolled out of bed and rubbed at his eyes. There were other things to dream about, namely the doctor-turned-wizard inhabiting this house, but his slumbering mind didn't seem to want to take his waking mind up on that. Pity, really. His waking mind had a lot of good ideas.

It was mid-afternoon, judging by the angle of the sun coming through the window. Loki looked outside, feeling jumpy, feeling like he was going to crawl out of his skin. Feeling like he was at war with himself, the person he'd been and the person he was becoming. Was he becoming someone different? Had it already happened? Was he even capable of that?

He shook himself. Suddenly, he wanted to go out. He'd drunk the last can of Grapefruit LaCroix last night, sitting in the Rotunda of Gateways, and he supposed it would be nice of him to go get more. It wasn't as though the Sanctum was a prison, but there was a part of him, an old part of him that he'd tried to stop being, that whispered that others would always try to force him into a box, and it would never be of his own making.

Going out to pick up some more sparkling water from the bodega wasn't exactly world-shattering, but it suddenly seemed like something he needed to do. It was as uneventful as could be—until someone recognized him because he'd completely forgotten to cast a glamor. Sloppy.

Strange was in the kitchen reading a newspaper when Loki came back in. His hair was messy and he was still in his pajamas. As Loki slid the sparkling water across the counter, he said, "Just so you know, I did my best to stop it."

Looking up at him, Strange furrowed his brow and said, "Stop what?"

Loki shrugged, trying to shove down the need to run his fingers through Stephen's messy hair. It was sticking up in the front. "I may have forgotten to wear a glamor when I went out." Strange made a noise, but Loki just ran a thumb along the edge of the counter and avoided eye contact. "I cast a spell to make her forget she'd seen me, but she was already on her phone, so she may have sent something—" He waved a hand vaguely. "—out."

Strange was staring at him.

Clearing his throat, Loki added, "I was going to go through her mind to find her passcode so I could delete whatever she sent, but I didn't think you'd like it if I'd done that. So." He shrugged again.

There was a silence. When Loki glanced up at Strange, there was simply a resigned look on his face. Sighing, he said, "Someone was bound to spot you at some point. It's fine. No one saw you come back here, I assume?"

"Of course not." He had no right to say it like that, considering he'd walked two blocks without a

glamor and only realized he'd forgotten it because someone had gasped and muttered his name. It was a good thing she hadn't screamed.

There was a silence. Then, Strange said, "Really? You thought I wouldn't like something...so you didn't do it?"

Loki kept his gaze lowered, still running his thumb along the counter, but then he raised an eyebrow and glanced up at Strange.

There was a funny look on Stephen's face, but he didn't pursue this. Instead, he folded the paper and put it down. Gesturing towards it, he said, "There's more of that gravitational stuff happening. Jersey City. A high-rise under construction just shot into the sky."

"Fell into the sky," Loki corrected him.

Strange rubbed a hand over his face. "I had a feeling this was going to happen, but I thought..." He laughed darkly. "I don't know what I thought. That I could stop it? I guess I was arrogant. Big surprise. Stephen Strange thinks he can save the world. He can't even save himself."

"Nonsense," Loki said. "You acquit yourself quite well in battle, Strange." A smile twitched at his mouth, and Stephen relented and returned it. Truthfully, seeing Strange admit this fear, this weakness, was terrifying. He knew what he was doing, when Loki never had. He was strong, and Loki most definitely wasn't.

There was a silence. Comfortable. Loki loved that about Stephen. In their silences, he felt accepted.

But he could tell Strange was worried and that he was keeping it to himself because—well, because that was what he did. Which Loki understood, as he was the same way. "You're afraid this is all futile," Loki said.

Strange let out a hard sigh. "I—yeah. Maybe. I don't know. I've been thinking..." He blew another huff of air out. "It's easier if I try to show you. Hold out your hand." Confused, Loki extended a hand, but Stephen shook his head and held his own hand up, palm out, facing Loki. Obediently, Loki echoed this gesture, and Stephen said, "Now, imagine that's the universe." He moved closer, bringing his hand within inches of Loki's. "And this is another one. They sit next to each other, but they never touch or interact in anyway. There are an infinite number of them, stacked alongside each other."

"The multiverse," Loki said. "I know."

Nodding, Strange said, "Okay. So now imagine—" Without warning, he slid his other hand into the space in front of Loki's hand, so their palms were touching. Loki felt his stomach drop out of his body.

Idiotic.

But Stephen's palm was warm, and braced against Loki's, some of the trembling was gone. Loki let his fingers fall forward, just a tiny bit, so they started to interlace with Stephen's. Not enough that he didn't have plausible deniability if Strange recoiled. But enough for longing to gape open in his chest.

Stephen's eyes flicked down to their hands, lingering there, before he looked back up. "Imagine another universe comes into being, branching off from an already existing one. This one—" He wiggled the fingers of the hand pressing against Loki's. "—owes its existence to its parent universe. And it shouldn't be there. It's unstable. Things don't work quite right. Over time, it

deteriorates more.”

Loki met Strange’s eyes. The fact that this description sounded unnervingly like the universe he currently inhabited—*his* universe, which he’d still blissfully think of as *the* universe if it weren’t for the Tesseract—was not encouraging. “How would that happen?”

There was no reason for their hands to remain where they were, but neither of them moved. Stephen looked like he was about to say something that he’d been avoiding verbalizing for some time, but which he knew had to be said. It was a look that Loki was deeply familiar with, since he’d seen it often enough on Odin’s face as the time had neared to choose an heir between Thor and him.

Don’t think about them.

“There’s another part to this,” Strange said reluctantly, not answering Loki’s question. “Eventually, the problems in our universe won’t just be limited to *our* universe. We’re too intertwined with the one we came from.” He interlaced his fingers with Loki’s and Loki couldn’t help but wish dryly that they could have held hands for the first time *not* as part of a demonstration about the crumbling of their reality. “Remember that evening in the marsh? I’m positive we were looking into our parent universe.”

Loki tightened his fingers and repeated, “How would that happen?” When his question was met with more silence, he added, “Strange.”

Strange ran a hand through his hair, then braced his palm on the counter and looked down at it. His fingers seemed to be trembling more than usual. “Probably a lot of things.”

“Stephen.”

At this, Strange looked up and met his eyes. “An altered timeline. Time travel that resulted in something being changed.”

Loki’s mouth went dry, and suddenly, he remembered what Mordo had said. *You don’t even realize—your problem is right in front of you.*

The bill comes due.

He had time traveled. He’d time traveled *a lot*. Was it possible that he’d caused this? Without knowing it? Had he changed something, somewhere, in human history, to result in everything going wrong now? Had he brought Ultimus here?

When his mouth opened to articulate—some of this, *any* of this, he found he couldn’t speak. Stephen was still holding his hand, though, and that was worth something. “There’s no way to know,” Strange said. “And it doesn’t matter. We can’t change it.”

Loki licked his lips and nodded. Finally, Strange let go of his hand. The silence, this time, felt less comfortable and more oppressive. So much rode on this Sanctum, on all the Sanctums; so much rode on the people who lived in them, who protected them. Half the time—more than that, probably—they didn’t even know what they were fighting. And yet now, with the Avengers gone, with Thor—

His fist clenched.

Now, the Masters of the Mystic Arts were Earth’s last hope. The universe’s last hope.

The two of them met each other's eyes and Strange smiled without much humor. "One of these days, we should do something fun. I bet you've never been to Coney Island." Loki ducked his head and laughed, a genuine laugh, surprised out of him, and Strange's smile grew less bitter. "You look ten years younger when you do that," Stephen said, his tone surprisingly soft.

Loki felt himself flush faintly. "More like two hundred years younger."

"Sorry, I still haven't figured out the conversion rate." Strange smiled at him again and his hand moved forward, brushing Loki's hip. It might have been an accident. But he didn't think it was. "Anyway, time to keep watch. Wong's taking care of a soft spot in Kentucky. It's a small one, luckily."

The two of them walked up the stairs together, but when they got to the second floor landing, Strange stopped, looking so uncharacteristically drawn that Loki didn't even have to think about stopping with him. He just did it. There was a word for when someone else's pain became yours, for when you felt so tied to them that you wanted to smooth the lines from their face and make them smile.

The two of them stood there in silence, light filtering down the staircase from the third floor but not quite erasing the shadows from Stephen's face. Eventually Strange put a hand on the railing and said, "I don't know if it can be fixed."

Loki rested his hand on the railing as well, his fingertips barely touching Strange's. Stephen didn't move his hand. "So we're all doomed?" Loki asked, smiling crookedly. It wasn't funny, but what could you do but laugh?

"Maybe." Rubbing at his eyes with his other hand, Strange said, "Since this started, I've been all over the multiverse. I've read every book I can find on the subject, and then all the ones that I thought *might* have something to do with it. It's harder than you might think to find information on how this ends, let alone how you fix it."

Loki watched him. "Maybe that's because it's never ended well. Hard to write a book about something when there's no one around to write it."

Stephen snorted. "You really look on the bright side, don't you?"

"I grew up with Thor. *One* of us had to be a pessimist." Was it getting easier to say Thor's name, or was he just getting better at lying to himself about the truth of Thor's absence?

At this, Strange laughed a little. "I guess every family needs one." He studied Loki's face, as though he was considering something, and then a look of decisiveness settled in his eyes. "You know, I have a sister. *Had* a sister, I should say. She died when we were kids. Drowned. It was an accident, but you know how it is. I felt responsible. Never stopped feeling responsible, really."

"So you became a doctor," Loki said.

"Predictable story, I guess."

"A bit." Loki hesitated. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah." Strange shrugged, a sadness on his face that he quickly wiped away. "The point is, I know what it's like. Feeling like it's your fault."

Loki made a noise deep in his throat but didn't respond to this. He couldn't. He physically *couldn't*. Just because something was true, just because it was reality, didn't mean he needed to

talk about it. How could he talk about something when he couldn't even bring himself to think about it?

On the railing, Stephen's fingers twitched. His tremor was almost unnoticeable when he had something to brace his hand against. Without warning, he covered Loki's hand with his, then withdrew it. Clearly, he had something to say, and Loki's silence, this time, wasn't going to deter him. "I just want to say—sometimes it's hard to know who's at fault for something terrible when you don't have any distance from it."

Something stuck in Loki's throat. If Stephen was telling him to stop blaming himself for—well, for everything, he should probably be made aware that there wasn't enough time in the entire multiverse for that. After a second, he met Strange's eyes. They seemed to be standing closer now than they'd been before, close enough that Loki could feel Stephen's body heat. It would have been an intoxicating moment if Loki hadn't been thinking about Thor. As usual, his brother was ruining everything.

"I also wanted to say," Stephen said, his voice quieter, "that you should let yourself feel."

The lump in his throat grew. "Feel what?" Loki managed to ask.

"Whatever you need to. Grief. Love. Loss. You know, all that Shakespearean stuff."

Two or three inches of forward movement and a little bit down. That was all it would take. That was all the space between their mouths right now. But the ache of desolation in Loki's chest kept him still. Even if he'd been sure that Stephen would kiss him back, he couldn't do it.

With a bitter smile, he said, "I'm Loki. I don't feel. Not any of that."

Strange looked at him, his expression unreadable. Then, with a wry look in his eyes, he said, "You know, no offense, God of Mischief, but you're one of the most human people I've ever met." With a smile that gave away nothing, he started up the stairs to the third floor. But halfway up, he stopped, turned around, and met Loki's gaze. "I mean that in a good way."

All Loki could do was raise his eyebrows. A tiny smile flickered across Strange's face. As he turned to continue up the stairs, he waved a hand over himself, and his pajamas changed to his blue robes as the Cloak of Levitation streaked through the air, then settled on his shoulders.

Loki leaned against the railing and crossed his arms over his chest.

You're such a liar.

Chapter 13

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



It's hot.

Loki wipes sweat from his forehead, wishes he could wipe it off his back. Maybe he should just walk around naked and simply glamor clothing on. Of course, the trouble with that is that he might bump into someone, and if it's Thor, he'll never hear the end of it. Leather isn't a sensible choice for New York in the summer, but he's hardly going to give it up and walk around in a t-shirt like Thor's taken to doing. It exposes the four ugly scars on his arm, the wound that never healed quite right. Loki did his best, but he's not a healer and Thor didn't want to go to a doctor. The scars still bother him, though he pretends they don't.

They're trying to lie low after their last battle with Ultimus's forces in the West Village. Two men in robes, one with a cape, had showed up right at the end. Loki had made Thor and him as invisible as possible to make sure they weren't followed, because he'd gotten an uncomfortable sense that the men weren't just a couple eccentrics, and that they knew exactly who they were looking at.

"He had Jotuns this time," Loki says, reaching up to pull his hair off his neck. Thor has his tied up in a bun, and after a second, Loki relents and magicks his up the same way. He doesn't like the way it looks tied back, but his comfort right now is more important than his aesthetic. Just barely.

"Hela must have joined him," Thor says. He sounds resigned. "The Nine Realms will all have fallen to Ultimus. All except this one."

Loki runs his fingers through his hair, digging them into his skull. Thor stops walking and looks at him in concern. It's rare for Loki to show his hopelessness so openly, rarer still for Thor to acknowledge it. "Why did he choose our universe?" Loki asks.

There's a silence. Thor looks afraid to speak. Afraid to say the wrong thing, perhaps, and have Loki snap at him. Suddenly, Loki feels bad for all the times he's called Thor stupid, all the times he's hurled invective at him, said he was an oaf, sneered at him for not living up to Loki's own

intelligence. But the moment passes, because really, Thor doesn't have any fear. He shrugs, then says, "Bad luck, I suppose."

"Bad luck," Loki sighs. "What a time to be alive."

"Truly, brother." Thor puts a hand on Loki's shoulder, grips it hard, then lets go. "At the very least, we're together."

Loki's brow twitches into a furrow and he frowns. "Is that worth the rest of it?" When Thor gives him a confused look, Loki waves a hand and asks, snarls, almost, "If you could take away all of this, and all you had to trade was me, wouldn't you?"

A semi blares its horn on the overpass they're standing beneath, but neither of them flinch. There's a look of confusion on Thor's face. "But it doesn't work that way," Thor says.

"Why not?" Loki asks. Why is he doing this? "Maybe it does. Maybe it could. One life for the universe. Surely you'd do it?"

Slowly, Thor shakes his head. "No," he says. "I wouldn't. We may yet win this fight. And." He hesitates, then puts a hand to Loki's neck. Thor's palm is possibly sweatier than Loki is, which is disgusting, but he doesn't move away. "Brother, how could you think I would ever trade your life? For anything?"

"I would trade yours," Loki snaps.

Shaking his head, Thor says, "You wouldn't."

With a bark of laughter, Loki says, "Of course I would. I'd trade your life for far less than the universe." In a mutter, he adds, "Like an air-conditioned room at the Ritz."

Thor smiles. It's a little sad, but mostly it's just knowing. "I would sacrifice my own life for the universe, Loki. But I wouldn't change what's happened, because it brought us together."

Glaring at the ground, Loki says, "Don't be a fool." It's amazing that a minute ago he felt bad for all the cruel things he's said to Thor over the years, and he's so easily slipped back into them. He never changes, does he? For all that he is change, his change is immutable. Predictable.

"Brother."

Despite himself, Loki looks up. Thor's gaze is both impossible to meet and impossible to look away from. The older brother that he worships, hates, loves. "What?" Loki mumbles.

"I love you," Thor says gently.

Loki's eyes sting. He swallows hard, then shrugs out of Thor's grip. "As I said, you're a fool." He kicks a crumpled, empty cigarette carton and his boot crunches down on glass, and he crosses his arms over his chest, turning away from Thor. His brother is silent.

Finally, Loki looks at the sky, what he can see of it between chainlink and barbed wire, concrete supports and derelict buildings. It's bright blue and clear.

"I love you too," he says finally, and keeps walking.

Loki opened his eyes. His stomach hurt. Something felt like it was trying to scratch its way out of his brain. He thought he'd only slept for a few hours. It had been another bad few days. Yesterday,

after two days of almost no sleep for any of them, he'd found Wong dozing at the kitchen table and had sat down next to him and stared at him until he'd woken up. Watching him jump practically out of his skin had been worth it.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" Wong had asked when he had his breath back.

With a slight smile, Loki had said, "Stephen's on watch right now, so, no."

Wong looked at him flatly. "Double entendre doesn't suit you."

Which Loki had frozen at. Wong had chuckled and walked away. Figured that one of the few times Loki heard the man laugh, it was at his expense. But within minutes of that, there'd been a crisis in Belize, which had required all three of them to leave the Sanctum and tend to it. Then there'd been multiple problems at once, so Wong and Strange had split up, Strange bringing Loki with him while Loki said, "One of these days, you should probably see about acquiring a sling ring for me."

"He has a point," Wong had said with a shrug.

Strange had just looked exhausted. Loki had wanted to smooth away the lines in his forehead, the dark circles under his eyes. He'd wanted to put his fingers to Stephen's temples and make him sleep for days with magic, so he would rest. And perhaps curl up next to him and wish he could have something nice.

It was Wong's shift now. Loki sat up and looked out the window. Perhaps he should ask for a clock and stop trying to tell time by the angle of the light coming in, though he'd become pretty adept at it. It was late afternoon. The days were getting shorter. It was September now—the twelfth, he thought? There was a calendar downstairs but he'd never paid much attention to it. The days didn't matter. Even when he'd time traveled, the days hadn't mattered.

To be honest, that had gotten him in trouble once or twice.

He showered and got dressed, and when he went downstairs, Strange was in the kitchen.

Loki stopped in the doorway. "I thought you'd be asleep," he said.

Giving him a wry look, Stephen said, "I could say the same about you."

With a shrug, Loki came inside. "We've had this conversation about me. You, on the other hand, are mortal, and clearly more in need of rest than I am."

Strange snorted. "Yeah, okay, doctor." He rubbed at his eyes. "I'll sleep when I'm dead."

"Which may be sooner than any of us would like," Loki said darkly. He dug through the cupboards until he found some tea, and as he boiled water, he added, "At the rate things are going."

With a tired chuckle, Stephen said, "Hey, did I ever mention I was never much of an optimist, either?"

Loki met his eyes, smiling a little, and got his favorite smile back, the sarcastic, dry one. The kettle boiled, and he brewed his tea. As he did so, he asked, as though he was making idle conversation, "What did Wong mean when he called the Eye of Agamotto the Time Stone?"

There was a silence. When Loki turned to look at Strange, he was rubbing at his beard with his thumb. "So you caught that," he said.

Giving him a withering look, Loki said, “Of course I did. As Wong meant me to. And as you’re perfectly well aware.” He blew at the tea, but of course it was far too hot. As he set it back down on the counter, he raised an eyebrow and asked, “Keeping things from me, Stephen?”

“Not in the way you’re implying,” Strange said.

“Then in what way?”

Strange set his jaw and exhaled slowly. “Wong feels that you should be made completely aware of what you’ve gotten yourself into. I...”

Loki was staring at him, feeling—*betrayed*? Him? Now the Norns were just being absurd. “Why in the Nine Realms should I *not* be made completely aware of what I’ve gotten myself into?” he asked, a nascent snarl in his voice. He’d thought—of all people, he’d thought he could trust Stephen—

But Strange held up a hand, looking guilty. “I wanted you to be able to get out, if you wanted to,” he said, sounding tired. “I wanted to...I don’t know. Protect you? Like you need protecting, I know, I know. You’re a god. But I just—” He shook his head. “Sorry.”

As quickly as Loki’s anger had risen, it receded. He didn’t want to be angry at Stephen.

When he just let out a huff of air and motioned to Strange to continue, Stephen ran a hand through his hair and said, “Have you ever heard of Infinity Stones?” When Loki simply furrowed his brow, Strange said, “I figured you probably hadn’t. Wong has a real flair for the dramatic when he tells this, so sorry to deprive you of that, since he had to go back to Kamar-Taj for a few hours. Anyway. The Infinity Stones were created at the same time as the universe, with the Big Bang, and each of them controls part of existence. There are six of them: Reality, Power, Soul, Mind, Space, and Time.” Putting a hand on the Eye of Agamotto, he said, “This is the Time Stone.” He gave Loki a meaningful look. “And you have the Space Stone.”

Loki’s eyebrows drew together in confusion. What was Strange talking about? Was he even more exhausted than Loki had feared? But then, with a pulse of insight tinged with blue, he understood. “The Tesseract.”

“Is an Infinity Stone,” Strange said. “And the gem in the scepter that you had in 2012—that was the Mind Stone.”

His brain was going in a hundred directions at once. The sensation he felt when the Tesseract and the Eye of Agamotto were in the same room—and which he’d felt with the scepter, he’d held—and Thanos had wanted—

“What could someone do if they had all six?” he asked.

Strange held his eyes. “Pretty much whatever they damn well wanted to.”

The Aether. The Aether was one, too. He knew the stories; Mother had told them when they were children all about the Dark Elves and the Aether. It had to be the Reality Stone. Where was it? Thor had told him that Malekith had been defeated, but where had the Aether gone?

“Thanos is still out there,” he murmured.

At this, Strange’s brow furrowed. “Who?”

But Loki shook his head. “Nothing.” He’d never told anyone about Thanos. He wasn’t going to

start now. Thanos would have to be a problem for another day. One reality-ending crisis at a time. At least Ultimus didn't know about these.

Loki closed his pocket dimension protectively around the Tesseract. He felt like its keeper, just as Strange and Wong were the guardians of the Eye of Agamotto. What an absolutely absurd idea—him, the keeper of anything, besides plans gone wrong and deep, *deep* self-loathing.

“So now that you know, you're kind of on the hook for the Time Stone, too,” Strange said quietly.

Loki didn't say anything. Then, with a thin smile, he said, “Well, I *do* like to accessorize.”

That got a laugh. “Yeah, obviously we're a pretty fashionable order.”

The tension that had been in the room fled, and Loki picked up his tea again. Finally cool enough. As he sipped at it and put it back down on the counter, he said, “I'll never understand the trust you show in me.”

“Yeah,” Strange said. “I know you won't.”

Loki opened his mouth to reply, but suddenly, the windows shattered. Without thinking, Loki threw himself over Strange, feeling the hail of glass shards patter across his back and his head, along with a wave of pressure that roiled his guts. Once the tinkle of glass on tile had quieted, he pushed himself up on a hand, pulled a piece of glass out of his hair, and said, “Sorry, I suppose you could have used magic for that.”

Strange grunted and shifted. Their legs were tangled up together, and Loki pulled his away, taking care not to get any glass on Stephen. “Yeah, no apology necessary,” Strange said, looking at the glass spread all over the floor.

A smile twitched at Loki's mouth. “I wouldn't want that pretty face of yours to get marred, Strange.”

Innocently, Strange said, “And I'm not complaining about having you on top of me.”

A bolt went through Loki, from his stomach straight to his groin, but Strange was already scrambling to his feet. There was a familiar feeling in the air and before Loki could stand up, there was a whoosh deep within his ears.

The two of them appeared on the street outside, Strange's hand under Loki's arm as he pulled him to his feet. There was a soft spot yawning open and Ultimus's creatures were already pouring through.

“Well,” Loki said, “it looks as though the protections on the Sanctum *itself* held, though attacking outside is really the next best thing.”

Strange snapped his arms out, shields appearing on his hands, and Loki summoned his knives to his hands and took his first good look at today's attack on reality.

They were Asgardians.

Loki's chest tightened and his mind screamed as he cursed Ultimus with every epithet, every piece of profanity, that he knew. Did Ultimus think that by sending his own people against him, that he'd stop fighting? Did he *really* think he could do worse than what he'd already done? Loki would fight him until Ultimus was dead, annihilated to dust and nothingness, or until he was dead himself. There was no in between.

With a hard laugh, Loki said, “It appears that I’m not the only Asgardian in your social circle anymore.”

“You have a really interesting definition of ‘social circle,’” Stephen said as the creatures charged them.

Loki shrugged, and, bringing his knives up, he crossed them and shot several balls of energy at the oncoming creatures. The Cloak of Levitation streaked through the shattered windows and settled on Strange’s shoulders, tripping up several of the creatures along the way and allowing Strange to open portals up beneath them to send them elsewhere.

Then, the Asgardians were on them, black eyes wide open and unseeing, black veins pulsing. Loki slashed at them, cutting throats and sticking them through whatever was left of their hearts, as Strange dropped his shields in favor of a rope of crackling magic, which he wielded like a whip.

Spreading his fingers, Loki flung a swathe of magic at their attackers, knocking the front wave off their feet. Strange transported them away, and as he did so, Loki kept the creatures off him, flinging a knife through the throat of one, then whirling to jam his other blade under the ribs of another, rage pounding through his veins the whole time. Rage was better than grief. He summoned the dagger he’d thrown back to his hand as Strange lashed out with his weapon, ducking down to whip it out. It wrapped around the leg of a nearby creature, pulled it off balance, and Loki stabbed it in the gut.

One of the creatures barreled into him from behind, its hand reaching around for his face, trying to rake his eyes out with its long, dirty fingernails. He ducked away but it got an arm around his neck, hooking its elbow under Loki’s chin and choking him. Right. They were Asgardians. And they were *strong*.

He flipped his knife the other way in his hand and stabbed blindly up and back. The blade found purchase, sinking into flesh, but even though the creature screamed, it didn’t let go of him. Then, suddenly, Strange vanished from in front of him. There was a hiss of magic behind him then he was free. As he whirled to face the creature, he saw Stephen had his weapon around its neck. He released it and immediately circled his hand. The creature dove for him, shrieking, black blood pulsing out of the wound in its side, but before it got there, a portal opened, then lensed shut the moment it disappeared.

“Fuck off,” Stephen said, snapping the rope of magic.

Loki caught his eye and gave him a feral grin. “Not a bad move, for a surgeon.”

Strange scoffed. “I guess I should take that as a compliment.”

And then they were fighting again. The soft spot seemed to be getting bigger and Ultimus’s creatures were still pouring through it. This wasn’t usually how it went. Usually they stopped at a certain point, because the soft spot got unstable on Ultimus’s end—at least, that was what Loki had always thought.

Oh no. Was this the one? Was this the one that Ultimus had figured out how to keep open?

Loki blasted a line of creatures with magic, then yelled, “Strange, we have to bind that soft spot or eventually they’ll overrun us!”

“It’s too big,” Strange shot back. He cast a spell that Loki had never seen before, causing the asphalt to fold in on itself, then outwards, covering a group of creatures, crushing them until their

screams cut off. Loki ducked a swinging hand and stabbed a creature in the chest, pushing it away, and as he turned back to Stephen, he caught a flicker of unease on Strange's face. "Last resort," Strange muttered, then turned towards the soft spot and cast a spell.

Mirrored planes fractured up and over the soft spot, and over the creatures still pouring out of it, and then all of it winked away into nonexistence.

Well, not nonexistence. It was the mirror dimension, which meant that inside it, the soft spot was still open and Ultimus's creatures were still coming out of it. But without a sling ring, they were cut off from the rest of the world.

A few of the creatures were still outside the mirror dimension. Strange opened portals up beneath several of them, but one was running at him from behind. Loki flung a dagger, which sank itself up to the hilt in the creature's throat. It toppled over as Strange whirled around. Loki flipped his hair out of his face. "You're welcome," he said, earning a wry smile from Strange.

That smile was thanks enough. Pathetic, but there it was. This was what love did to you.

That took care of all of them. As Loki made his way to Stephen's side, stepping over bodies, he realized he had to decide if he was alright with that. Being in love with this mortal. Because he was, wasn't he? What was the point of denying it anymore?

Then again, even if he wasn't alright with it, did it matter? It was what it was. He didn't think he could turn it off now even if he wanted to.

Strange was surveying the carnage in the street. "Maybe next time, we could try not to kill as many of them," he said.

Pulling his dagger out of the creature's throat—refusing to look at its face, in case this was someone he'd once known—Loki waved a hand over the blade to clean the blood from it, then vanished it back into his sleeve. "Right. 'Do no harm.' I'll stop killing them if they stop trying to kill us." Glancing at Stephen, he asked, "Why haven't you been putting them in the mirror dimension this whole time?"

"Because," Strange said. "The mirror dimension is even less stable than our universe these days. I give that one a week before it collapses."

Frankly, this didn't seem like a reason not to have made more use of this method, but Loki didn't want to argue. "I suppose we'll deal with it in a week, then," he said. Strange just made a noise.

The two of them stood side by side, both breathing heavily. His blood was up, adrenaline was coursing through him. It made him feel like all the reservations about his feelings that he'd been piling up in front of himself like a barricade were immaterial. Less than immaterial. Nothing. Pointless. Easily knocked aside, because he was a fool to have put them there in the first place. Because suddenly, Loki was vividly aware of *how* close Stephen was, of his body heat, his smell—sweat and magic and something indefinably *him*, the smell of his soap and laundry detergent and his skin—the fact that it was all too easy to imagine him breathing like that under different circumstances.

He turned. Stephen was looking at him. And Loki may have been young by Asgardian standards, but he'd been around long enough to know that look. This was stupid. He wasn't strong enough to fight it. He wanted Stephen Strange. And it was very clear that Stephen Strange wanted him too.

You want me on top of you, do you, Strange?

Letting out a hard exhalation of air, he closed the remaining distance between them and brought a hand up to trace his thumb lightly over Stephen's cheekbone. There was a look in Stephen's eyes, a *yes, fuck yes, what are you waiting for* kind of look. So Loki stopped fighting.

He kissed him.

And if Loki was given to sentimentality, to poetry, to romance, he would have thought something like, it was more than a single, stupid point of physical contact between them, more than their mouths opening to each other and Stephen's hands on him, it was—it was—well, there was *magic*, because that was who both of them were. He ran his hands down to Stephen's shoulders, then chest, and his arms went around him, his fingers catching on Stephen's belts. Stephen pulled Loki closer, his hands in his hair, palms pressed to his ribs and his hips, and for a minute, maybe two or three, or maybe an eternity, Loki gave himself over to the moment and stopped thinking.

But just as magic was at the core of who he was, so was thinking. Reluctantly, with a quiet groan, he pulled back, breathing more heavily now than he'd been during the fight. After a second, he opened his eyes to find himself looking into Stephen's, and he wished, not for the first time in his life, that he could be someone else. Not a Frost Giant raised as an Asgardian, not a pawn in a warlord's delusions of godhood. Not someone broken irreparably by his losses. Someone without his scars. Someone undamaged, who could fall in love and let that be it.

Most of all, he wished he could be someone who didn't wish he was someone else.

But Stephen was looking at him, knowing about all his damage and mistakes. Or if not all of them, then the most important ones. The worst ones. Loki knew that he knew, even if they'd never talked about all of them. The ones that he'd made to turn himself into the monster that he was born to be, and then turned around and tried so hard to atone for. There wasn't anyone left to love him. Did that make him feel the ache of this gift even more acutely? Probably. Was he going to twist the knife and let himself fall into this even more?

Possibly.

Alright, fine. Definitely.

"I have to admit," Stephen said, brushing his knuckles across Loki's face, "I didn't see this coming."

Loki smiled slightly. "No? You didn't use the Time Stone to look into your future?"

Returning the smile with a faint one of his own, Stephen replied, "I didn't say that. I said I didn't see *this* coming." Abruptly, he sobered. "I've never been able to see you at all, Loki. It's like you're...untethered from time. Unfixed. Like you're free to make any future you want."

Loki didn't respond right away. Then, he said, "Aren't we all?"

Stephen looked torn, like he regretted bringing this up, but finally, he replied, "Yes and no. Every decision that everyone makes affects something or someone else. None of us are free of that. That's why you can follow threads through time—every decision leads to others. They're possibilities until the choice is made to make them reality, but in a way, they all exist simultaneously." He stopped talking, then narrowed his eyes thoughtfully at Loki. "But *you*...you don't have a thread."

His hand stroked Loki's face again and Loki could feel it trembling. He reached up and covered Stephen's fingers with his own. The trembling stilled. Loki wasn't arrogant enough to think it was

because of him. “That sounds like quantum theory. Quantum theory, with a bit of the Norns thrown in for good measure.”

It was easier to say this than confront what any of it meant. Now he knew what the look that he’d seen on Stephen’s face so often had meant. In a universe that was falling apart, nothing good could come of being untethered from it. Stephen had told him that their universe owed its existence to another, one that had been split apart. In a world like that, someone who was untethered from everything was a person who had to make a difficult decision. A person who had the ability to do something that no one else could.

Strange had said they couldn’t change what had happened.

What if that wasn’t true?

Loki didn’t want to be the person who could change it. He didn’t want to be *special*. Not that kind of special. He had only ever wanted the sun of his family’s love, and now that was gone.

He didn’t know what he wanted anymore, besides, right in this moment, Stephen Strange. He wasn’t foolish enough to think this would last. But he wanted it. Oh, how he wanted it.

His mind was already scurrying towards realizations, towards inevitable disaster and tragedy. “Our universe was never supposed to exist,” Loki said slowly. “*We* were never supposed to exist.” The truth of this, and the weight of it, was finally starting to sink in.

“No,” Stephen replied. Then, he caught Loki’s eye and added, his tone entirely free of innuendo in that dry, amused way that Loki loved, “Which means we should probably make the most of the fact that we do.”

This was enough, for the moment, to put a stop to the thoughts that he knew he was going to have to think. But maybe he could put them aside for now. There was a burn deep in his stomach and a rush of blood and heat, and—oh yes, he wanted to make the most of it, he’d been wanting *that* for awhile now. Wanting and thinking, the kind of thoughts that he’d tried to confine to lying in bed, his face turned into his pillow to muffle his moans when his thinking also turned to doing.

Loki smiled in a way that was very much *not* devoid of innuendo, and a look of profound need and—something else, something that Loki wouldn’t presume to name—flashed across Stephen’s face. Without breaking eye contact, he circled his arm, and a portal opened next to them with the Sanctum on the other side of it. But instead of stepping through it, Stephen raised a hand to twist his fingers in Loki’s hair, then pulled him forward into a deep, slow kiss that made heat spread through Loki’s body, and which left no doubt as to his intentions on the other side of that portal.

The sun was setting, the night was young, and Stephen’s bedroom was beckoning. Loki broke the kiss and said, with a smile full of a certain kind of promise, “I’m still a god. I think we can make rather more of it than you ever have...”

Stephen laughed and held out a hand. Loki took it and the portal closed behind them with a *snick*.

Chapter 14

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



Loki woke, for once, from a dreamless sleep, to a bed that wasn't his, with the warmth of another body next to him. It took him a split second of almost-panic to remember where he was. Whose bed this was and who he'd spent last night fucking. He relaxed and breathed deeply, rolling onto his side so he could drape an arm over Stephen, sliding a hand over his chest and pressing his lips into his shoulder. Loki's fingers found a jagged scar near his heart. Courtesy of the accident that had taken the use of his hands? Or something else? If he had his way, he'd have the time to learn this man by touch alone. Every scar, every ripple of muscle and bone under skin, the feel of his mouth, the feel of Stephen inside him, and of being inside him. Everything.

Of course, Loki never got his way. And time, he had a feeling, was one thing that they didn't have.

Stephen took a deep breath and stirred, his hand finding Loki's. "You were right," he said, his voice still thick with sleep.

That was something Loki didn't hear very often. "About what?" he asked, trying to remember what he'd said the previous night.

"The you being a god thing."

"Oh." Loki grinned. "*That*." Yes, it had been good. Very good. Really, extremely good; the kind of sex that made your toes curl with the memory of it, the kind that made Loki's hips ache to move again. They hadn't been a god and a mortal, they'd just been two gasping, sweaty bodies; tangled limbs, lips and tongues and things whispered in the dark.

The memory of that made it hard to think. Or maybe that sentence should have been, simply, the memory of that made it hard. Him. Whatever. Who needed wordplay right now. He disentangled their hands and moved his lower across Stephen's chest, over his belly, and down. They were already in bed together, weren't they? No point in squandering opportunity when it presented itself.

It was inevitable that Loki's hand where it was on Strange would lead to more, and when it did, Loki closed his eyes, moved with Stephen, and wondered how sex could feel so, *so* good. Maybe it really *was* the magic. This was beyond anything he'd ever felt. The fact that a mortal man was making him moan and gasp this much, and feel like his body wasn't enough to contain so much pleasure was...unexpected. He could only hope he was giving as much as he was getting. There was repeated evidence—four or five instances of it, actually, not counting what was currently happening—to suggest that he was.

When they'd both finished, Loki could do nothing but rest his forehead on Stephen's shoulder and catch his breath. They were both slick with sweat (not just sweat) and their bodies were hot, so Loki's hand slid easily back up to Stephen's chest. After a few minutes, Stephen turned onto his back. Loki propped himself on an elbow and quirked an eyebrow as he met Stephen's eyes, which made Strange smile, then pull Loki's face closer to kiss him.

It made Loki's stomach drop out of his body again, despite the fact that he now knew *exactly* what promise was behind that kiss. Not much mystery left, physically speaking. But Stephen made him feel *young*. Young and stupid. It was funny, even though Stephen was centuries younger than him, he seemed older. Like he'd somehow seen more, even though that couldn't possibly be the case. Then again, he had the Time Stone. Who knew how much he'd lived?

Loki ran his fingers through Stephen's hair and made a quiet, helpless noise as teeth nipped at his lower lip. He was *not* in control of this situation, that was becoming quite clear. In a few hours he might care, but with Stephen's body beneath his, he didn't.

Eventually, they broke apart. With a chuckle, Strange said, "I had a feeling when I brought you back here that you'd be a distraction."

"I aspire to nothing less." Loki smirked. "You *do* know what I'm the god of?"

"Huh. Can I say after last night, I'm wondering if you have another moniker besides 'mischief' that I wasn't aware of? Or is that too much?"

Loki nuzzled at Stephen's neck, his tongue flicking out to taste him. Stephen made a noise deep in his throat and Loki smiled to himself before he lifted his head again. "I never turn down complimentary epithets."

A crooked half-smile flickered across Stephen's face and he ran a hand down Loki's body, letting it linger in several places that made Loki muffle groans and arch his hips. "Alright," Stephen sighed. "I really *do* have to get up. Can't do much to protect the world from here."

Shifting to allow Stephen out of the bed—much as it pained him to do so—Loki snorted, "Right. You know, you could have come up with *something* a little less noble and important sounding. I can't exactly try to convince you to stay here, now."

"You could," Strange said, stretching as he stood up. Loki had to take a moment to stare appreciatively. "It feels like the kind of thing the God of Mischief would do."

"Yes, but the God of Mischief isn't stupid, and he knows what kind of person he's—" But Loki stopped, not wanting to say what had nearly slipped out of his mouth. It was one thing to admit it to himself. It was something else entirely to say it out loud. "What kind of person you are," he finished instead.

Stephen looked at him. Loki got the feeling that he knew what the admission was that Loki had nearly stumbled into. And that, in turn, made him realize that he didn't care. He didn't care if

Strange knew the truth, *this* truth, at least. Was it his imagination or was the same thing reflected back at him?

Best not to dwell on it. Instead, Loki let a smirk creep across his face, then said, “You could put us in a time loop with the Eye. That way we’d have ample opportunity to make sure we’ve explored...*this*...and we can still protect the world at our leisure.”

With a laugh, Stephen said, “Not really its intended use.”

“Is it my problem Agamotto was a prude?”

Stephen laughed again, then said, his gaze softening, “If anything was ever going to tempt me to break every law of nature for no one’s gain but my own, it would be you.”

Loki opened his mouth to respond but found that he didn’t know how to. When he closed his mouth, Stephen gave him a wry smile and picked up a bath towel. “I’m going to shower,” Stephen said. “You’re welcome to join me.”

Speaking of temptation. But Loki shook his head. “Take your shower, Stephen. You’d only have to take another if I was in there with you. And then the water would just be cold.”

Stephen paused and his fingers tightened around the towel before he wrapped it around his waist. “Okay, I’m going. For real. Probably taking a cold shower, now, anyway...”

Loki grinned as Strange left the room—reluctantly, if what had started to appear under the towel was any indication—and then laid back down. For the first time in years, he felt relaxed. It wouldn’t last. His mind wouldn’t let it. But for now, he closed his eyes and let the sun shine on his eyelids and enjoyed it.

His eyes opened. What had that been, about fifteen seconds? His thoughts had already moved on from the way Stephen’s body had felt under his hands to the bodies they’d left in the street outside, and the living creatures that those bodies had once been. Asgardians, twisted almost beyond recognition by the time they’d spent being pulled apart and remade in Ultimus’s dimension. His people. He’d had a responsibility to them and he’d failed them, just like he’d failed so many.

He sat up and looked at his clothes, still laying mingled with Stephen’s on the floor where the two of them had torn it all off each other last night. Loki had never been so eager to get another person’s naked body underneath his. That was a nice thought, at least, which made his skin prickle in remembered sensation. Really, he needed to shower too before he got dressed again. He smelled like sweat and sex. If he was anybody but who he was, he’d lie there and wait his turn for the shower, wait for Stephen Strange to come back, and think about how he’d fallen in love.

But he wasn’t anybody. He was himself, and much darker thoughts wouldn’t leave him alone. The Tesseract was niggling at his awareness, for one thing, pushing him towards something. Or maybe that was him projecting, because there was something *he* wanted to know, and it was easier to blame it on an Infinity Stone. There was another universe, the *right* universe, that had been split in two. His universe had been poked full of holes by Ultimus and was already broken beyond repair. He knew, suddenly, deep in his bones. Was the other one, too?

Glancing at the door, he held out a hand, and the Tesseract appeared there. He turned it over in his hands. Nothing good had come of him having it and far worse had come from him using it. But he had to know. He had to know what the life was that he was supposed to have lived.

The buzz of magic and power was back, and Loki glanced over to the bedside table, where the Eye

of Agamotto was sitting unattended. Stephen trusted him enough to leave it in his presence. He shouldn't have. Really, he shouldn't have. People didn't trust Loki, and he'd long ago decided to stop fighting that and give them a reason not to. But Stephen had been different from the beginning. He'd let Loki prove one way or the other if he could be trusted.

He stared at the Eye and he thought about what he could do with two Infinity Stones.

He thought about what the two of them could do with two Infinity Stones.

He sighed and held the Tesseract up to his face. He'd done so much harm without meaning to. He wasn't the sort of person who was *meant* to wield two Infinity Stones—and he surprised himself by being fine with that. The one was enough for him. Oh well. Settling.

The Tesseract pulsed once, its blue light brighter, a question. Loki got out of bed, magicked away the sticky mess on his belly and back, and pulled his clothes on. Then, he held the Tesseract tighter and thought about where he wanted to go.

Chapter 15

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



Loki had never known why the Tesseract was willing to bring him through time. It had seemed a strange quirk, maybe something he'd done to it. Or far more likely, something it had decided to do itself. The Tesseract was more than a pretty, magical cube, which Loki had known from the first moment he'd seen it in Odin's weapons vault when he'd been a child. Something had changed it, made it reach out its powers to encompass not just space, but time. Then again, weren't space and time just different facets of each other? It was what he'd told Strange, at least, and he had no better explanation.

So he didn't know, and he didn't question, why it had chosen to do this for him. But as he stood in the other dimension, in a deserted Times Square, he had to decide whether or not he needed to time travel. Because something had happened here, and it was imperative that he find out what.

Garbage littered the street and sidewalk. Broadway was choked with empty cars, as though something cataclysmic had occurred and everyone had fled, leaving everything they owned where it dropped. But there was no damage to the cars. No damage to the buildings. No bodies, either. If something terrible had happened here, it had left no evidence except absence.

He shapeshifted, just in case this had something to do with him. Rather, the him in this universe. She swept her hair out of her face and took several steps forward, then peered through the open window of a car. There was a handbag on the passenger's seat, open and with its contents strewn over the upholstery. She reached in and picked up a wallet, flipping it open. There were no credit cards or money inside, but the driver's license had been left. Darcy Lewis.

"Fucking looters, haven't you pricks gone through this stuff already?" a voice said from behind her.

Tossing the wallet back on the seat and turning around, Loki asked, "What happened here?"

"Good one," said the man standing behind her. "What, you been living under a rock for the past six

months?" He walked away, muttering again, "Bitch."

Loki pursed her lips at the man's back. Fine. The locals were definitely *not* going to be forthcoming with information. Finding out what was going on would take some sleuthing.

She headed for the Apple Store. If it was still open, then it wouldn't be a problem using one of the computers.

As she walked, she could see that people *were* still around. Stores and restaurants were still open. But everyone she saw looked lost. They held themselves as though they were surrounded by New York's throngs of people, but there was no one's space to respect. It was as though for every one person there'd been in Manhattan, one had disappeared.

The Apple Store was still open, though.

Once the employees left her alone—clearly desperate to make a sale; there weren't many people in the store—she rested her fingers on a laptop keyboard and thought about where to start.

Where is everyone, she typed into the browser search bar.

A headline blared out at her from the top of the search results: COURTS ORDER STATE LEGISLATURES TO REDRAW DISTRICT LINES AHEAD OF ELECTION.

Ugh, politics. She'd hated them on Asgard and she hated them even more on Earth. She scrolled past a few articles about a new census, then paused, her fingers swiping the cursor to hover over the link. "The Snap."

When she clicked on it, it brought up a Wikipedia page. A banner at the top warned her, "This article documents a current event. Information may change rapidly as the event progresses, and initial news reports may be unreliable. The last updates to this article may not reflect the most current information," and below it, another saying, "This article possibly contains original research."

This was what she was looking for. Leaning an elbow on the table, she scrolled down to the article.

The Snap refers to the event that eliminated 50% of all life in the known universe.

A chill went down Loki's spine. What? For a moment she simply stared at the words on the screen, unable to read further. That couldn't be. That couldn't *be*. Except she'd been outside. She'd seen the abandoned cars, the empty streets. It clearly *was*. Unbidden, a memory scrabbled at her, of darkness and horror and hopelessness and a ship, and the mad Titan stroking Loki's face as she—he at the time—forced down screams of pain and hissed, "What do you want with the Tesseract, anyway?"

And Thanos had smiled and replied, "The universe requires balance, Asgardian. You can play a part in that, if you would only accept in your heart that this is the right path."

She blinked and blew a huff of air out through her nose, then continued.

This event occurred at the end of the Battle of Wakanda and was initiated by Thanos of Titan, wielding the Infinity Stones (citation needed).

Each one of these proper nouns was linked, but Loki didn't need to follow any of them. This was enough.

The repercussions of the Snap continue to unfold.

Half of all life. Half of all life in the *universe*. Loki's stomach shriveled into a tiny, hard ball of iron. Thanos had done it. In this universe, Thanos had done it, somehow. Had the Loki of this universe brought the Tesseract back to him? It was an impossible thought. Loki had never wanted to deliver it to Thanos; she hadn't cared about his insane plan. She'd wanted what she'd always wanted, which was to be seen as her brother's equal. Thanos had offered a kingdom, revenge, and not much of a choice. The rest of it was something to be dealt with later. Was she so different here?

What if—Surtur's teeth. Asgard, Thor, her mother. Half of them were gone. Her head spinning, she typed 'Asgard' into the search bar without even thinking how foolish this was; after all, why would an Earth website have an entry about Asgard—

But a page popped up. She froze, making her eyes focus on it. *New Asgard*, it read.

An employee came by behind her and said cheerfully, "Let me know if you have any questions I can help you with—"

She whirled, grabbed him, and said, "What is this? Is this real?" The employee looked panicked at her grip on his arm, but she didn't let go as she jabbed a finger at the computer screen. "New Asgard?" she demanded. "What's New Asgard?"

"Yeah, I don't know, that's where all the refugees from Asgard settled after the Snap," he said, trying to pull away.

She let go of him and read only far enough in the article to see two words: *Tønsberg, Norway*.

And she didn't care that she was in the middle of the Fifth Avenue Apple Store. The Tesseract appeared in her hand and she clamped her fingers around it, stepped back, and disappeared into a portal of black and blue.

Loki dropped out of the portal in one of his most graceless exits to date, landing face first in soft green grass. He'd shifted back to male in transit because—because—why? He didn't really know, except that the last time he'd been in Asgard, among his people, he'd been a he.

He pushed himself up, his hands digging into grass and dirt, and looked around. The Tesseract had spit him out on a cliff overlooking the sea. Wind whipped through his hair as he sat up and looked out over the ocean, his breath coming short and fast. He needed to calm down.

Licking his lips, he slowly climbed to his feet, bracing himself against a rock that looked almost like a throne. At least he hadn't landed on *that*. As he stood there, he made a concerted effort to slow his breathing and his pounding heart. He shouldn't have come here, and yet, he couldn't have done anything else. The Tesseract had barely given him a choice. It had demanded he come here, snatching at his mind and infusing his will with its own.

That sounded like madness.

Was he going mad?

Closing his eyes and breathing deeply, Loki did his best to calm his racing thoughts. He was here now. Hadn't he come to this universe because he wanted to know? There was no better way to know than seeing with his own eyes.

He turned. Less than a mile away, he could see a small village set into a natural harbor. Well. That would have to be New Asgard, wouldn't it? It didn't look like much. Maybe it would be more

impressive when he got closer.

Obviously he was going to have to wear a glamor, which he cast on himself, taking the face of the Apple Store employee that he'd just terrified. Then, he set off, covering the distance purposefully.

New Asgard didn't look more impressive when he got there. There was nothing to it. It was a fishing village. Even from his vantage point on the cliffs overlooking the settlement, he could smell fish. There was no gold, no grandeur, nothing of the Aesir in this place. Could he have read wrong? Could he have misunderstood?

He narrowed his eyes and clenched his hands into fists. What had that man said at the Apple Store? *That's where all the refugees from Asgard settled after the Snap.* Why would his people need to come here? Why would someone call them refugees? And where...

Where were they? Asgard was a city of thousands, even if—Loki swallowed—even if Thanos had wiped out half of them, there should still be many, many more people here. But the village below him looked like it could only be home to a couple hundred people at the most.

Maybe Thor wasn't even here. Maybe Thor had been one of the people who had been killed in the Snap.

He closed his eyes. *Stop lying to yourself, Loki.* That was the real reason he was here, wasn't it? It wasn't just to see the life that he should have had. It was to see his brother. He opened his eyes and took a deep breath. He would have to go into the village and ask.

He looked down. The cliff dropped steeply here, the grass worn away where people had scrambled up and down the slope. Below him, where the ground leveled out, there was a small house at the end of the road that led through the village. Loki crouched and slid down the slope, a hail of dust and gravel coming with him as he made his way down from the cliff. When he found himself in front of the house, he brushed dirt off his clothes, then looked up, tilting his head in thought.

He *could* ask here. The village was so small, surely whoever lived here could point him in the right direction. Anyway, this was Thor they were talking about. Unless things had changed more than Loki could possibly conceive of here in this universe, everyone would know where Thor was. Or what had happened to him.

Setting his shoulders, Loki made his way around the house and approached the front door. There were noises coming from inside, possibly a television, possibly several people talking. After a moment, Loki raised his fist and rapped on the door.

There was no response at first. Loki put his ear to the door and heard a voice ask, "You want me to get that, man?"

Then, another voice, much closer to the door as it said, "No, it's fine, I was getting up anyway, got to get another beer—"

Loki jumped back as the door swung open.

And then his throat closed, his mouth went dry, and all he could do was stare.

"Are you here to install the cable?" the man asked. "Finally decided I need cable, none of this streaming stuff, sometimes I just want to, you know—" He had to pause to let out an enormous belch. "—just want to put something on without *thinking* about what I want to put on. So, right, do you need to install a hook-up or something outside?"

Loki's voice had completely deserted him. The man was staring. There was a smell of beer and unwashed bodies wafting from the house. Two choices: walk away, or speak. He chose.

"Thor," he said, astonished when his voice came out sounding normal.

Thor scratched at his stomach. He was shirtless. There was a little weight around his midsection, a little flab on his arms. He didn't appear to have shaved in months. His hair was shorter than Loki was used to, but it was shaggy and looked unwashed. "Yup," Thor said. "That's the name on the account." He peered around Loki. "Shouldn't you have a van or something?"

"I'm sorry?" Loki said, still finding it miraculous that his voice was working. He was rooted to the spot.

Looking at Loki again, Thor said, "You're here for the cable, right?"

"I...ah...no." Loki blinked, furrowed his brow, and said, "I'm sorry, I was just—I made a mistake. I thought someone else lived here." He told himself to turn around, but he couldn't. He couldn't make himself stop staring.

Thor rested a hand on the doorframe. "Just me," he said, sounding cheerful about it. Then a shadow darkened his face, a darkness that was achingly familiar. "Just me," he added more quietly. A change came over him, and before Loki's eyes, Thor transformed into something else. *Someone* else. His shoulders sagged and his eyes unfocused, then filled with sadness, and he looked down at the ground. No God of Thunder here. No heir to the throne of Asgard, or whatever was left of it. Just a man.

Loki had thought—if he could see his brother again—he'd thought he would throw his arms around him and never let go, but this...this wasn't his brother. Somehow, somehow, this wasn't his brother. He looked like Thor (sort of), he sounded like Thor, he was called Thor, but there was something...wrong. There was something broken.

But then, the moment passed, and Thor smacked his fist on the doorframe a few times. "Hope you find who you're looking for," he said, smiling at Loki with that big, stupid, puppy dog grin. But it was different, it was wrong, it was so—so *sad*.

"Thanks," Loki said as the door shut.

He stood there staring at it, still unable to move. Then, slowly, he turned around. His feet found the dirt road and followed it into the village, though he didn't know what he was looking for anymore. He'd found his brother. The press of disappointment was so intense and crushing that he could barely breathe.

Or maybe that wasn't disappointment. Maybe that was grief.

He reached the pier. A woman walked by him carrying a bucket full of—ugh, disgusting—chum in each hand. There was a sword belted around her waist. Surely no one needed swords here? "Excuse me," he said, turning to face her. She stopped and turned around, giving him an impatient look. Her dark, curly hair was tied up in a bun and her eyes were flashing in irritation.

"What?" she asked.

He glanced back towards Thor's house. His heart felt black. What had he been expecting? What in the Nine had he been expecting? "I was wondering if I might ask you something," he said.

There was a suspicious look in her eyes. "Depends. We're a little tired of strangers asking questions

around here.”

Her snippy tone helped bring him back to himself. Nothing like antagonism to get him on an even keel. “Yes, I can imagine you are.” One question then, despite the fact that he had millions.

But the look on her face stopped him. She was giving him a penetrating stare and he was hit with sudden trepidation that his glamor was somehow wearing off, or that she could see through it. Both were ridiculous, of course. “You remind me of...someone,” she said.

“Someone?” he repeated, raising his eyebrows.

She shook her head. “Someone I used to know.”

No doubt almost everyone that she’d once known was gone. If this was all that was left of Asgard...

The thought was difficult to stomach. He could only see fifteen or twenty people, all of them looking drawn and foggy, as though they couldn’t quite understand where they were or how they’d gotten there. There had to be more, but...how many? How had Asgard been so decimated?

But then, she shook herself and said, “Well, go on, then. Ask your question.”

He ran the fingernails of one hand over his thumb, fidgeting, and asked, “Do know where Thor’s brother is?”

Her expression went from wary to hostile and she bared her teeth, her eyes blazing. “I should’ve known,” she spat. “Another fucking *journalist*; haven’t you vultures bothered us enough? You better not have been pestering Thor, or I’ll rip your head out through your sphincter and tie it in a knot with your intestines—”

She’d been advancing on him this whole time, and as she reached this particularly descriptive threat, she dropped both buckets, their contents splattering everywhere as they hit the ground, and drew her sword.

His eyes locked on it. He’d never seen one, but he’d know the sword of the Valkyries anywhere.

She was a *Valkyrie*. How...?

Two million questions, and he wasn’t even going to get *one* answered.

With great effort, he resisted the temptation to draw his daggers, instead just holding up his hands. “No, I’m not—I just—” But his quick wittedness had deserted him. What story could he come up with that she’d believe? That he was, what, an old friend of Thor’s brother? Loki may have had friends on *his* version of Earth, but he had no idea of the state of affairs here. He certainly hadn’t been making any friends in New York six years ago.

“I was just...wondering,” he finished lamely. Her sword was still raised, but he didn’t really think she’d cut him down here, right in broad daylight, in the middle of the village. People were staring, too, and though they were Asgardians and thus likely to be on her side instead of his, a few of them still looked ready to step in.

Her nostrils flared, but then she lowered the sword. “What kind of stupid question is that?” she spat. “I already told the media. They asked me and I told them. He’s *dead*, Thanos killed him. He died protecting our people.” Her eyes were hard and bright. “He died trying to protect Thor,” she said. Then, abruptly, she turned away, re-sheathing her sword.

Loki felt frozen. This must have been what it was like to have the Casket of Ancient Winters affect you. “Dead,” he repeated, like it was a foreign word, like his Allspeak was failing. “Thor’s brother? Loki?”

“Last time I checked, that was the only brother he had,” she said without facing him, going back to retrieve her buckets. He let her walk away. His face felt bloodless, his fingers cold, even though—was he really surprised? The way Thor had been—sad, defeated, broken—Loki recognized that. He *knew* how you ended up that way, at least he knew how a Prince of Asgard ended up that way, because wasn’t it exactly how *he* had?

He’d lost Thor, and Thor, here, had lost Loki. It was a terrible, nauseating symmetry, a mirror held up along the fissure between the universes to reflect this pain in both directions, through different realities.

“Wait,” he said, his voice hoarse. He had to know one more thing. He had to know if Loki, here, had reconciled with Thor. If they’d been brothers again. If they’d had that, at the very least. She didn’t stop, but then he said more loudly, “*Wait*. Please. Tell me something. How long did it take Thor to find his brother after he stole the Tesseract from the Avengers? After the Battle of New York?”

The Valkyrie turned around, her face frozen in a grimace of confusion, disgust, and grief. “What are you talking about? Thor brought the Tesseract and Loki back to Asgard after the Battle of New York.” Her nostrils flared again. “Now get out of here, before I change my mind about running you through.”

He stood there, his legs refusing to do anything.

If, in this universe, Thor had brought Loki and the Tesseract back to Asgard after New York, and in his own universe, Loki had taken the Tesseract after the Battle, then—that meant—

Everything made sense suddenly, with a horrifying, terrible clarity. Everything. It snapped into place and he saw himself for what he was. Saw what he’d done, saw *everything* he’d done, and for the first time he didn’t look away.

You don’t even realize—your problem is right in front of you.

He made himself leave. Did he stumble? He didn’t even know. He couldn’t remember moving, but suddenly he was outside the village, tripping over rocks, his feet sliding into the frigid sea, water soaking his legs, and finally he stopped and fell to his knees, fingers clenched around the edges of the flat rock he was kneeling on, and his stomach rebelled.

He heaved, bile and little else coming up, and he couldn’t stop it any longer, he couldn’t push it away, and he *remembered*, and his stomach heaved again—

Loki holds the Tesseract in one hand, a dagger in the other, and he’s watching as the entire street is overrun with Ultimus’s creatures. Thor’s swinging Mjøl̥nir with all the fury that only he can. His brother, the God of Thunder. Loki rolls his eyes. Thunder isn’t going to save them. Thor really should know this.

And yes, Thor has told him not to do this. But Loki’s the planner. He’s the one that thinks things through. And he’s thought this through. He knows the risks. He knows it might go horribly wrong, but really, what choice does he have? They will lose this war, are already losing this war, if Ultimus isn’t stopped.

So he licks his lips, opens the portal, and steps through. There are screams around him as bystanders see the Tesseract's smoke and assume it's something else coming for them. Thor won't even notice he's gone because he'll return to this exact moment.

The plan is simple. He goes to one universe, finds what he needs, opens the portal to Ultimus's dimension. Ghaszaszh Nyirh follows him, because it's hungry and Loki sends promises whispering into its ear. When Loki sees it, the first twinge of unease goes through him. This is an Old One. This is a creature that really shouldn't be trifled with. But those words are in Thor's voice and Loki already knows what Thor thinks of this plan.

He uses the Tesseract again, opens another portal, Ghaszaszh Nyirh in tow, and squints into the black starlight of Ultimus's dimension. His skin feels like it's flaying itself apart already. "Have at it," Loki says, flicking a wrist at the Old One, and then uses the Tesseract again to vanish into another portal, back to his own universe.

When he reappears next to Thor, he's a blur of flashing knives, cutting down these horrible creatures before they can touch either one of them. Thor grins at him as he uses Mjøltnir to call down lightning on a group of them and Loki feels smug. His brother never noticed his absence.

They may be losing this war, but they can win each individual battle. What chance does anything stand against the two of them? Thor strikes a creature under the chin, sending it flying, and says, "You know, brother, I hate to say it, but I might miss this a bit when we don't have to do it anymore."

Loki snorts and sends a ball of energy into the face of an enemy. "I'm sure we can find something else for you to punch."

"Well, there's always something," Thor says cheerfully.

Spinning, Loki slits the throat of a creature that's too close, shoving it away so it leaves a smear of black blood on the asphalt. "Personally," he says, "I'm looking forward to a bit of a vacation."

"We can take a vacation," Thor agrees, taking out another creature with a brutal uppercut.

"It might be nice to learn how to ski," Loki says musingly, as he flings a knife and it finds its mark.

Thor laughs and takes a moment to clap him on the shoulder. There are only a few creatures left and once they're gone, Loki will close this soft spot. They're certainly not winning any wars tonight, but it's a nice thought.

Then something comes through.

The remaining creatures scatter and Loki and Thor stop, watching as the soft spot ripples and disgorges—

Ultimus.

Loki has only seen him once, but he'll never forget. It's because there's nothing inherently special about him, this conquerer of the multiverse, this Kree Eternal. He looks around and his eyes, oil-slick black, find Loki's.

He smiles.

And Loki knows that he's made a terrible mistake.

Before he can say anything to Thor, his brother is yelling, his hammer raised, charging Ultimus. Ultimus raises a hand and Loki doesn't need to turn to know that a soft spot has torn open behind him. It feels as though the world has slowed, and he closes his eyes for what feels like a second and an eternity.

Then, he brings his hands up, a dagger in one and magic crackling at the other, as Ghaszaszh Nyirh squeezes through the soft spot, its segmented legs cricking and popping, the bristly hairs at its joints reaching into this new dimension it finds itself in, its mouth gaping open, full of rows of razor teeth, needle sharp and dripping with something.

For heaven's sake. Loki hates it when Thor is right.

Ghaszaszh Nyirh swings a leg—of course there's a barb at the end of it—and Loki throws himself out of the way, then scrabbles to his feet and backtracks. There's a fence somewhere at his back and he doesn't want to corner himself against it; even if he can pass through it, that will require a spell and he doesn't know if he'll have time to cast it.

He tries flinging a stream of energy at Ghaszaszh Nyirh but it does nothing, it does less than nothing. It bounces off the Old One's carapace and scorches the asphalt in front of Loki's boots, and he moves again, his mind frantically riffling through ideas. He can use the Tesseract to send it back, provided he can come into contact with it, but Ultimus knows it's there now, probably knows where to find it—Loki has shown him the way—

There's a ghastly scream behind him, a needle right through his eardrums, and a huge, hairy leg comes down in front of him, then behind him, and Ghaszaszh Nyirh's mouth full of teeth looms, filling his vision.

There's a yell. The rage of battle. He drops to the ground and rolls away, and as he looks at his brother, he shouts, "Thor, you idiot, where's your hammer?"

One of Ghaszaszh Nyirh's barbed feet swings at Thor, and Loki lunges for it with a dagger, jamming it between breaks in its carapace with every bit of his strength. Ghaszaszh Nyirh screams again, but it's enough time for Loki to grab Thor and pull him out of the way.

"Gone," Thor says, breathing heavily. Blood is pouring from a gash on his face. "Ultimus opened a soft spot and it—it's gone." There's a look of profound loss on his face, but it gives way to dismay as Ghaszaszh Nyirh swings for them again. "Why didn't you listen to me, Loki?" he demands.

"When have I ever listened?" Loki asks.

"You're such a fool—"

They dodge Ghaszaszh Nyirh again, but as Loki spins out of the way, a barb catches in his longcoat, yanking him to a stop. He falls to the ground hard, the air knocked out of his lungs. When he flips himself over onto his back, it's in time to see another of Ghaszaszh Nyirh's barbed legs headed straight for him.

The barb pierces him right below the ribs, sinks straight through him, and for a long, long moment, all he can do is stare at the black shaft that he's just been gutted on. It doesn't even hurt. How is that possible?

Ghaszaszh Nyirh almost seems to smile, its teeth opening and closing and scraping together like some sort of horrible saw string orchestra, and it lowers its head, mouth opening.

There's a howl full of rage and then Thor is there, wielding a ragged piece of sheet metal over his head like an axe. He brings it down on Ghaszaszh Nyirh's leg, severing it. Black ichor spurts everywhere, all across Thor, whose howl of rage turns to one of pain as the ichor hits him and smokes, burning his skin, blinding him where it splatters across his face. Loki's brain is screaming at him to move but he can't, blood is pouring out of him, somehow the ichor hasn't hit him but he feels like acid is burning straight through his heart—or maybe that's just the barb that's still embedded in him—

Thor stumbles, clawing at his eyes, and Ghaszaszh Nyirh's head swings down, its jaw hinging open, and then its mouth full of razor teeth closes around Thor's midsection.

There's a moment, a moment where Loki thinks, don't be ridiculous, he's the God of Thunder.

And then there's a horrible crunch and Ghaszaszh Nyirh flings its head up, something in its mouth. Something hot and wet splatters across Loki's face and Thor falls to the ground in front of him, except it's just his legs and half his stomach, the rest of him is shorn off and gone, and there's blood, so much blood, and he realizes that the sound he's hearing is his own screaming as he struggles to his feet, blood pouring from the wound in his chest, magic crackling through him, electrifying him, is this what Thor feels when the thunder rips through his veins? There's no plan, there's nothing except searing grief and rage and the need to kill this thing, to annihilate it, to send it somewhere that it will never touch his brother again.

His magic fills every cell in his body. And then he explodes with it.

The sound of water brought him back. Slowly, Loki opened his eyes, staring into water lapping around the rock that he was still curled over. A thin stream of bile trailed from his mouth. Shakily, he wiped it away with the back of his hand. He was a fool. He was such a fool. Thor was dead, and it was his fault.

All his fault.

He squeezed his eyes shut and curled his fingers under themselves, feeling his knuckles scraping open on the rough rock. His feet were dangling in the water and growing numb. Uncomfortable, but it wouldn't hurt him, so he didn't move them.

His hair tickled his face and he realized he'd allowed his glamor to drop. That was enough to make him sit up and look back the way he'd come to make sure no one had followed him. Why would they, though? Why would they follow a stranger that they didn't want around? They probably hoped he'd thrown himself in the sea, these Asgardians who he'd wronged without ever knowing that he had. He wished that he still didn't know.

That was a lie.

Breathing slowly, Loki dipped a hand into the water and splashed it on his face, cleaning the vomit off his chin, then running his wet hand through his hair. This was what he'd come for. This was the universe that he'd ripped apart. They didn't know it yet, but they would. Ultimus would come here, too. He'd come for them. He'd come for the Valkyrie, he'd come for the tiny number of Asgardians left in the universe. He'd come for this universe's Stephen Strange, if he was even alive. He'd come for Thor.

He closed his eyes again. The water slapped against the rocks and the smell of brine filled his nose. He'd found what he'd come for. Time to go home.

Chapter 16

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



Loki stepped out of the Tesseract's portal into his room. Mid-afternoon light slanted through the window. He'd been gone for hours. It felt like years. It felt like he'd left as one person and returned as another. His hands were shaking as he waved them and the cube vanished. He didn't know if it was from rage, fear, devastation, some combination of all of the above, or something else that he couldn't put words to.

But before he could think about it, there was a *whoosh* deep within his ears. Strange and Wong appeared in front of him, both of their arms already whirling into position to call up their mandalas.

He didn't move. It only took the two of them a moment to realize the intrusion they'd felt into the Sanctum was him. It was a mark of how far he'd come with both of them that Wong was only a fraction of a second slower to lower his arms than Strange was.

There was a silence. Then Strange said, "Where were you?"

Loki glared. "I wasn't aware I needed to report all my movements to you in advance."

"I don't think it's too much to ask that you give me a heads up that you're planning on, you know, leaving the planet, especially after—" Thankfully, Strange cut himself off before he broadcast their nighttime activities. Not that Loki was shy about it, but a little discretion might be nice, especially considering the way the two of them were currently glaring at each other. "Where the hell did you go?" he asked again, his tone harder.

Wong looked between the two of them, clearly understanding what 'especially after' was referring to, and took a step backwards, pointing vaguely over his shoulder with both hands. "I think I'll go shelve those books in the library," he said. "Stephen, you seem to have this...ah...in hand."

"Was that supposed to be a joke?" Stephen called after him, getting no answer in return. Loki's scowl deepened when Strange turned his gaze back to him. Instantly, Strange's expression sobered.

"I'm going to ask you one more time," he said quietly. "Where were you?"

Loki sneered. "I thought this wasn't a prison."

"It isn't!" Strange said, sounding frustrated. "But—Jesus, Loki, I left you in my *bed* when I went to take a shower. I come back and you're gone, and I've gotta say, you don't seem like the type to hit it and quit it—"

"You know *nothing* about me," Loki snarled. "You think because you bedded me once, you *understand* me? That's *romance*, Stephen, and romance is for children and simpletons." He didn't know why he was arguing this point, when no, it hadn't been that at all, and what had he been but romantic about the two of them? But he was tired of people thinking they knew him, understood him, when he didn't even understand himself.

"*Loki*." Strange ran a hand through his hair. "There's a *list*. I told you, remember? Every day, all day, I have that metaphysical warning that *you're here*, on Earth, in New York. And then, this morning, it was gone. Don't you understand?"

Clenching his fists until they were bloodless and white, Loki snapped back, "That you're keeping tabs on me? I suppose I should have known, after all, I've been no friend to this realm—"

"God, stop, just stop." Stephen's hands drew Loki's attention and he stared at them, because he didn't want to look into his eyes. Suddenly, he was terrified of what he'd find there. One person left in this universe who had dared to love him, and Loki was currently doing his best to push him away. Well, that was what he did, wasn't it? "I was *worried* about you," Stephen said. The Cloak, sitting on his shoulders, fluttered. "How could I be anything but worried?" His hands were shaking worse than Loki had ever seen.

Digging his fingernails into his palms, Loki said, "Don't worry about me. I don't want your concern."

Strange pinched the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb. "Please just tell me where you were. You weren't on this planet. Where did you go? Asgard?"

He almost used a spell, almost forced Strange out of the room so he could slam the door in his face. But instead, he growled inarticulately and pushed past Strange, leaving the room himself. He wasn't sure where he intended to go, but his feet brought him to the stairs, and then up to the third floor, where he stopped, staring at the Oculus and breathing hard. The metalwork across the window made him want to scream, this symbol of an order that he'd somehow become attached to, almost a peripheral member of, by accident. Because he'd wanted to *help*, because he'd known, deep down, that he was responsible for this.

He thought about raising a hand and shattering the window. That would show them all who he was.

There were footsteps behind him, but Loki didn't turn around. He didn't need to. "I went to the other universe," he finally said in a tight, coiled voice. "The one I broke."

There was a long pause. And then, Strange said, "You did *what*?"

The Tesseract's light lapped at Loki like waves. "I wanted to see," he said. "I wanted to see a universe that wasn't falling apart."

With these words, he turned around. Stephen was still, looking torn, as though he wanted to ask what Loki had seen, but didn't want to give the impression that he approved of the field trip. But

shouldn't Strange know exactly what was there? It was nothing for him to travel between dimensions. "And?" Strange finally asked. "What did that look like?"

Loki stood there, feeling like he was going to explode out of his skin, like shards of his awareness were fighting to burst out of him. Then, he laughed, a hard, humorless laugh, devoid of any joy. Practically devoid of any sanity. He was losing it. He was *really* losing it.

"I'm dead there," he said when he finally got his breath back. The laughter died instantly, and he was left feeling appalled and angry and offended, somehow, though he didn't know who had offended him. Thanos, for killing him? Himself, for dying? "*I'm* dead, but—" Thor wasn't. Thor *wasn't*. His throat closed and he couldn't finish the sentence, and he realized what he was offended at was the universe, the multiverse, for taking his brother from him here, and for taking him from his brother somewhere else. Their family felt cursed. "Did you know?" he demanded, clenching a fist and glaring at Stephen. "Did you know what was happening there?"

"Loki—"

"*Did you know?*" he snarled.

Stephen sighed. "No. I've had my hands full in this universe. I haven't felt the need to go poking around in other ones."

"You *told* me you've been all over the multiverse—"

"Not there!" Strange interrupted. His eyes flashed. "If I went there, it wouldn't be like dropping breadcrumbs in the woods. It would be like carving a whole goddamn road through a forest for Ultimus to follow."

The urge to deflect responsibility from himself was a reflex, but Loki had been so prepared for this that he took it obliquely and just snapped, "Which is what I just did, right? Why not, though, I've already torn apart the fabric of reality for both universes, may as well speed up the process—"

Strange put his hands on Loki's shoulders, but Loki shrugged them off. Stephen didn't bother to look hurt. "*You* aren't the one who opened up the possibility of divergent timelines. Someone else must have done it."

"But I *did* take the Tesseract. I'm surprised at you, Stephen. You're one of the good guys, I would have expected you to say I should have faced my punishment." Loki clenched his fists and grit his teeth, then said, "That's the split, by the way. Did you know that? In the other universe, I was brought back to Asgard and imprisoned. I didn't take the Tesseract."

"I didn't know," Stephen said softly.

His calmness, the fact that he wasn't blaming Loki, was maddening. This was *Loki's fault*. Destruction and ruin followed him, and sooner or later, this simple fact would occur to Strange. So why was he being this way *now*? Now, when Loki was ready to lose him?

Stephen crossed his arms over his chest. "And I hate to tell you this, but you're one of the good guys, too." At Loki's laugh of incredulity, Strange said, "Come on. You saw all those other universes, all that darkness, and you decided not to be part of it. You came back to this one and you've been fighting for it ever since. You've helped Wong and I more than you know."

Loki stared at him. "I'm a monster," he said. "I was born one. And I've never been able to outrun that. It doesn't matter if I've helped someone else, or how much darkness I fight because it happens to be trying to kill someone or something that I love. I do these things for *myself*, don't

you see? That's what makes us different. And one day I'll be one of those monsters again, because I can't be anything else."

There was a long silence. Stephen looked at a loss for words. Surely he knew all of this? Surely he knew that inside Loki was a dark, hungry abyss that came for everything good in his life?

Finally, Stephen said, "You know, my teacher at Kamar-Taj used to say to me, we never lose our demons, we only learn to live above them."

Loki tried to speak, to tell Stephen that this was a losing battle. But Stephen put his hands on the sides of Loki's face. "That's what you've done every day since I met you. I get it. You don't see it. But I do." He hesitated. "You asked me once why I saved you." His hands were warm, their trembling barely perceptible against Loki's skin. Holding Loki's gaze, he said, "I was there, that day. I saw your brother die. I saw what *you* did after that. And I thought, anyone who can feel that much pain and grief, well—there has to be something in them worth saving."

Why couldn't Stephen understand that Loki had *never* felt worth saving? It was the reason, after all, that he'd let go and fallen, metaphorically and physically, from Asgard. Loki pressed his lips together and the knot in his throat tightened. Then, he swallowed and managed to say, "I don't remember anything that happened. Not after—" His ribcage compressed, but he forced himself to say, "Not after Thor died." *Not after I killed him.*

"You saved a lot of people."

Loki shook his head. "It doesn't matter, though. Does it? It doesn't matter how many people I saved. You and Wong trying to hold this universe together. Thor and I, whatever we did to stave off the inevitable."

Because he finally understood. He got it. The truth, the future, was written in blazing runes in front of his eyes, so obvious that he didn't know how he hadn't seen it before. There *was* no way to save this universe. The only way to fix things was to go back to the split, to where the universes had diverged from each other, and prevent such a split from occurring in the first place. So when Stephen hesitated, Loki sighed, then asked, his tone flat and emotionless, "How much time do we have?"

He *was* a fool. Why did he let himself get attached to other people, why did he love them, when it only ended in heartbreak? Every time. Every. Single. Time.

Stephen didn't move. Didn't smile. Didn't look sad. It was a reflection of how Loki wished he could look, but he knew the pain was showing on his face. "How much time do you need to make a decision?"

There was a long pause. It was always going to come down to him, wasn't it? *Untethered from time*. This universe could fall apart bit by bit and eventually take the other one down with it. The other universe, where Thor was alive. The other universe, which could be fixed—but only by eliminating the diseased branch that had sprouted from it, where nothing should have been. Was there even a decision to make? He'd failed his brother here. He wouldn't do it again.

Finally, Loki said, "I already have."

This finally made Stephen break eye contact and look down at the ground. A muscle in his jaw worked before he looked back up to Loki. "Then how much time do you want?"

With a harsh laugh, Loki replied, "Don't ask me that. Not when you've known this whole time

how this was going to end—”

“I *didn't* know,” Stephen interrupted. “Give me some credit. When have I ever lied to you? Do you really think I would have kept it from you if I’d known?”

“I think you had your suspicions,” Loki snapped. “I think you’ve been concerned for quite some time that the only way to fix this universe is *not* to fix it, because it can’t be repaired. I think you slept with me knowing full well that we could both be dead within twenty-four hours. You have that stone around your neck and you *know* things, and you knew that we won’t just be *dead*, we’ll never have existed. We’ll be erased.”

A flash of guilt finally crossed Stephen’s face. “I tried to tell you what I suspected.”

“You were purposefully vague.”

“I could have explained better,” Stephen said, as though he was correcting Loki. Then, smiling wryly, he added, “And can you blame me for taking the chance to sleep with you when I had it? I mean, come on. The opportunity clearly isn’t coming around again.”

That *smile*. “Don’t,” Loki said warningly. Don’t joke, he meant. For once, Loki’s morbid sense of humor deserted him. He wanted to stay angry, because being angry was *worlds* easier than being sad, which was what was coming next.

Stephen didn’t look particularly chagrined. “So how much time do you want? If it’s only another minute or two, I won’t lie about being disappointed. But I’d get it.”

Clenching his fists, Loki said, “How much time do *I* want? I think *you* need to answer that, Stephen.”

There was a long silence. Stephen looked taken aback, as though he’d taken for granted that everyone present was privy to his inner life, when the truth was that he was just as adept at hiding it as Loki was.

“Loki,” he finally said. All trace of wryness had evaporated from his tone, and he looked as sad as Loki was fighting not to feel. “I’d have you stay here forever if I could.”

Loki’s chest ached, a deeper and more grasping pain than the wound that had brought the two of them together in the first place. He swallowed, looked away, and stared towards the Oculus, which let light, and nothing else, into the Sanctum. It was a bad metaphor for the way he’d tried to live his life. Let people’s light in, but nothing else. Let them see what he wanted them to see, but never allow them real access.

He’d been good at it, but the problem was, you only had to be bad at it once or twice to be broken beyond repair. Thor had come too far inside the sanctum of Loki’s inner world—smashed his way in, usually—but once he was there, Loki couldn’t prise him loose. *Wouldn’t* prise him loose. And that love, that trust, had destroyed him.

Maybe, given time, he could have let Stephen Strange in, too. Maybe he already had. Loki smiled bleakly. “I suppose forever isn’t going to be very long, is it?”

The two of them stood in silence for a long time, silhouetted against the light of the Oculus. Loki refused to bow his head in the face of the collapse of his entire universe. The *literal* collapse of his entire universe. If he was the one that had to put it right, he wasn’t going to collapse himself. He was a Prince of Asgard. He was the rightful king of Jotunheim. He was the God of Mischief.

Thor would laugh if he could see Loki now, playing at being a savior. A hero. Except, he'd probably say that Loki had always had it in him to be the hero, and that the mistakes he'd made didn't change that. He'd probably say that the two of them had spent centuries fighting side by side, being heroes together, and that they'd keep doing it forever.

Thor would say Loki didn't need to play at being a hero, because he already *was* one.

A hard lump of iron and ice rose in Loki's throat, but the urge to cry didn't get any further than that. He hadn't shed any tears for his brother, because no amount of crying could ever ease or erase the grief. It would be with him forever. Maybe it was a good thing forever *wouldn't* be that much longer. Stephen Strange was a balm, and his love—because Loki thought, he really did, that Stephen felt the same way he did—was a bright, beautiful solace in the wreckage of Loki's life.

Stephen held out a hand. Loki considered scorning it. What was the point of prolonging this, what was the point of pretending they had something, when all they'd ever had was stolen time? All any of them had ever had was stolen time.

But Loki reached out and took Stephen's hand, and Stephen's fingers tightened around his. "If we're going to do this, we're going to do it right," Strange said.

"We?" Loki asked.

Smiling wryly, Stephen said, "What, you don't think I'm going to let you save the universe all by yourself, do you?"

Loki returned the smile despite himself. Well, he *was* the God of Mischief, what else could he do? "Remember, I'm a pessimist. I'm destroying the universe, and that's a very Loki thing to do. Maybe you don't want to share any of the credit."

Stephen shook his head and rolled his eyes. Suddenly, Loki's mind felt like it was going to collapse under the weight of his own hatred for himself, his fight to hold it at bay, the fact that others could love him, his gratitude for this and the fact that he knew he didn't deserve it. It was all too much, and all he could do was pull his hand out of Stephen's. He took a step closer, put both his hands on either side of Stephen's face, and kissed him hard.

One of his hands slid around to the back of Stephen's head, his fingers in his hair, as Stephen kissed him back with the same fierceness. It still didn't seem right that a mortal could make Loki feel this way, but between the way Stephen's body felt pressed against his, to his mouth and tongue and occasionally teeth, to the heat Loki felt whenever Stephen touched him—well, maybe he'd never given mortals enough credit.

And then, as suddenly as he'd kissed Stephen, he broke away, squeezing his eyes shut and drawing in a deep breath. He could feel Stephen's breath on his face and each point of contact between them, but he couldn't move, didn't know what to say. What was he doing? What did he know about fixing anything? All he knew was that he couldn't stand up to the weight of all of this. If a minute ago he'd been determined not to bow his head, now he knew that it had broken him. Finally, after everything he'd survived and fought through, this had broken him. He'd destroyed everything. The universe was bad enough. Thor's death was worse. It was too much.

Stephen put his arms around Loki and pulled him into a tight hug. "Am I feeling enough for you, Stephen?" Loki asked, competing emotions snarling his voice, making it feel like barbed wire coming out of his throat. When Strange had told him to let himself feel, it could only have been because he had no idea of the mess inside Loki, the morass of darkness and confusion limned with the light of his better nature.

Putting a hand gently to Loki's head, his fingers tangling in his hair, Stephen made a noise, then said, "You can fall apart. It won't scare me off." His hand stroked Loki's hair. "Seriously. You should see some of the dimensions I've been in. *That's* scary."

Loki snorted and leaned his head against Stephen's, closing his eyes. *You would have left eventually* he thought, but didn't say.

Maybe he was lying to himself about that, too.

He breathed in and out slowly, forcing himself to listen to the sound of his own breath, so that he wouldn't hear the sound of Thor's final words to him, or Thor's spine breaking, or the repeated screed of blame in his own head. Of course, Thor's final words had been right. *You're such a fool.* And the voice in Loki's head: *yourfaultyourfaultyourfaultyourfault*, it was him, the voice that had always been with him. Against that voice, Stephen was nothing. It was a gale inside him, blowing straight from the icy canyons of Jotunheim, ice cold and frigid, chilling everything in its path.

His brow furrowed and he swallowed hard, then put his hands on Stephen's chest to push him gently away. Perhaps he didn't think he'd be scared off. But Loki knew better.

Without a word, he turned away, stalking down the stairs to the study. He pointed a finger at the fireplace and flames exploded over the brickwork, licking at the hardwood floor before they subsided back into the hearth. Then, he curled up in his favorite chair, legs under him, and buried his face in his hands.

It was dusk when Loki lifted his eyes to see Stephen standing in the doorway of the study. The fire had long burned down, but Loki hadn't bothered to re-conjure it. Had the afternoon proceeded fully into evening, he would have, because he hated sitting in the dark. Especially alone.

"Can I join you?" Stephen asked.

Loki held out a hand, flicking his wrist as an afterthought, as though it didn't much matter to him. "Be my guest." He thought Stephen would sit down, but instead, he came to lean against the side of Loki's chair.

His proximity was distracting. But Loki felt his shoulders tense. His...breakdown...had been, in retrospect, mortifying. He'd had worse, he supposed. He liked to think he'd never broken, but that wasn't true, was it? If there was one thing that *had* been true over the past several years, it was his cycling between holding it all together, white-knuckling his grip on his life, and losing it entirely.

If Strange asked him if he was alright, it might just start all over again. But Stephen crossed his arms over his chest and asked, "Do you want something to eat?"

With a snort, Loki said, "I think I'd rather have something to drink."

"That can definitely be arranged, too." Stephen smiled. "I think there's a Château Cheval Blanc somewhere in the wine rack."

Smiling faintly, Loki asked, "Should that mean something to me?" The two of them looked at each other. So much to say. So much they'd never say. There were a million questions, a million things to learn, and he'd only scratched the surface.

Finally, Loki said, "I've been thinking." Surprise. What else did he ever do?

"About?" Stephen prompted when he didn't go on.

Loki sighed and uncurled his legs from underneath him, putting his feet on the floor. “What to do.” Stephen didn’t speak, just raised his eyebrows questioningly, and Loki folded his hands together in his lap. “And I think I’m tired of thinking about it for tonight,” he said, smiling mirthlessly.

“Well.” Stephen hesitated. “We’ll still be here tomorrow.”

Unspoken, of course, was that the supply of tomorrows was limited. Still, they’d have a few. “I was planning on it,” Loki said.

Stephen finally moved closer, putting a hand on Loki’s shoulder, his fingers massaging the tight muscles there. When Loki didn’t move away, those fingers moved his hair away from his neck, brushed against his bare skin, and slipped under the neckline of his clothes. When Loki let out a single, soft exhale, Stephen said in a low voice, “Don’t sleep alone tonight.”

Loki reached up and wrapped his hand around Stephen’s forearm. “Who said anything about sleeping?” he asked.

As his hand slipped further inside Loki’s clothes, Stephen leaned down to kiss him slowly, so slowly, as though they had all the time in the world. Loki reached up to pull him closer, kissing him the same way, letting heat gather behind his sternum and slide down through his body.

The tremor in Stephen’s hands hadn’t stopped him from being able to unhook, unclasp, and unbutton the many layers of Loki’s clothing the first time, though he’d been slower at it than Loki would have liked. Now he knew what he was doing. Perfect use of a photographic memory.

It was only when his leather jerkin was open halfway down his chest and his tunic was hiked up almost to his shoulders that Loki broke the kiss and said, “Let’s go to your room, Doctor. You’re hard to reach from here.”

“Oh,” Stephen said, and then, “am I?” He didn’t sound very surprised at all.

With a smirk, Loki hooked a foot around Stephen’s ankle and pulled, sending him falling towards Loki’s lap. Stephen caught himself, of course, orange mandalas flaring out from his palms and keeping his hands hovering just above the arms of the chair. It was a much better position for Loki though, and he unbelted and undid Stephen’s robe in a couple practiced motions.

This changed nothing.

But it made him stop thinking. And he needed to stop thinking.

And.

And he wanted it. He could have kept wanting it for a long time.

Loki slid his palms along Stephen’s ribs, making him shudder and hiss something about freezing hands. With a sharp smile, Loki pulled him closer to kiss him. When Stephen let his magic drop, he braced himself with a knee against the arm of the chair and the rest of his body against Loki. Apparently cold hands weren’t too much of a problem. It made Loki want to be underneath him, his weight, his warmth, every inch of his bare skin.

One of Stephen’s hands trailed from Loki’s face, down his neck and chest to the waist of his pants, and Loki’s hips arched as that hand wandered lower, sending a bolt of red hot, gut churning desire through him. “If we were here alone,” Stephen said into Loki’s mouth, then cut himself off as his fingers worked to undo another set of buttons and his mouth and tongue were otherwise engaged.

Loki broke away enough to say, “If you’re going to tell me all the terrible things you’d do to me right here, let’s save time. Just do them.”

Stephen laughed, then gave Loki a smile that made him ache with need.

And then, without warning, Loki was falling.

Literally falling, that wasn’t a breathless metaphor. Stephen had opened a portal beneath him, and Loki found himself tumbling through it and landing on his back. On the plus side, he’d landed in Stephen’s bed. Even better, Stephen landed on top of him, pressing him into the mattress as he worked Loki’s tunic over his head and Loki finally pulled Stephen’s robe all the way off. “That was a dirty trick,” Loki said, drawing in a sharp breath as Stephen kissed his neck, then kept kissing him as he moved down his body, his hands pulling Loki’s pants off. Skin on bare skin, Stephen’s knee nudging his legs apart, hips raised, heart hammering.

Looking up at him, Stephen said, “Oh, I have a lot more if you liked that one.”

Loki ran his fingers through Stephen’s hair, drinking in the sight of him. He had beautiful eyes, this human wizard, sometimes blue, sometimes green, occasionally both, and they were always as clear as the sky after it rained, or a forest as the sun came up. Clear and full of a biting intelligence, sharp humor, and resolve—but behind that, a softness whose existence seemed to surprise even him. It was all there now, the way he was looking at Loki.

He twisted his fingers in Stephen’s soft hair. He would never presume to call this man *his* human wizard. But if things were different...

But he let that thought die. Stephen Strange was on top of him, his pants were halfway off his hips, and if Stephen thought *he* had some dirty tricks, Loki was about to remind him that he was over a thousand years old. With a crooked grin, he said, “Do we have time for all of them?”

Chapter 17

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



Loki woke and opened his eyes to see that it was still dark. The early hours of the morning, if the lack of traffic noise from outside was any indication. His legs were tangled with Stephen's and Stephen's body heat at his back made Loki hate himself for falling asleep to begin with. There was no time, why were they wasting it sleeping? But Stephen was breathing deeply and Loki couldn't bear to wake him. One hand was resting on Loki's chest. They didn't tremble in his sleep.

Closing his eyes and exhaling slowly, Loki allowed his thoughts to get away from him. He'd always thought too much, after all. It was a trait which Thor had never appreciated, but his mother had understood. "Just take care," she'd said to him once, not long before Thor's failed coronation, "that you don't get lost in all those thoughts." She'd smoothed his hair away from his face, looking pensive, and he'd wanted to ask her wryly how he could possibly stop thinking so much, when it was so clear that he got it from her.

The thing was, he didn't really need to think. While he'd been sitting in the study earlier, the knowledge of what he had to do had planted itself in his head. No thinking required, for once. There hadn't been time to tell Stephen yet, but he would. He owed it to the man not to walk out on him without explanation. What had he said? Loki didn't seem like the type to hit it and quit it? Loki had been many things with many people, actually, but in this case, Stephen was right. But it wasn't just that. He needed Strange's help to pull this off.

He covered Stephen's hand with his own and shifted, pushing back to try to eliminate any space between them. Nothing was permanent. Stephen's life would be a candle guttering out compared to Loki's, if either of them had been allowed to live to their natural ends. But Loki could have done this until the end of Stephen's life, if all that mattered was finding another person who somehow got their hands on your soul and wouldn't let go.

The problem was, that wasn't all that mattered. There were other things. Family. Saving the universe. The multiverse. Something bigger than him, bigger than both of them. Bigger than this,

as much as he wished this could be enough. It never would be. He missed Asgard. He missed his mother.

Most of all, he missed Thor.

He didn't just *miss* Thor. He was broken without Thor. And Thor, in the other universe, was broken without him. Maybe they didn't share any blood, maybe they were from different worlds, maybe they'd both made mistakes, too many mistakes to count. But they were two parts of a whole. And Loki wasn't going to cobble that whole together with two pieces that would never fit quite right. The only way to put his family back together was to put it back together in another universe, with the right pieces. If that meant he wouldn't live to see it...well. Such was life. And death.

Of course, it meant the other Loki, the one that was currently dead, would have to be the one to fix *this* universe.

Loki concentrated on Stephen's arm around him to steady himself. This was what he'd decided. Use the Tesseract to go to the other universe, to the time and place of the other Loki's death. Take his other self's place there. Die for him, and Thor. The other Loki would come here and stop the Tesseract from falling into his hands in the first place. When that didn't happen, if he understood things properly, this universe would cease to exist.

There was a stillness to—everything, when he allowed his mind to think this with such clarity. A crystalline quality to everything, from the pauses between Stephen's breath, to the feeling of each of his fingertips resting over Loki's heart.

He wasn't afraid of dying. Not exactly. He'd known pain, terrible pain, horror and fear, but he knew that this ending he'd chosen wouldn't be prolonged. He was more afraid of where he was going to end up. His family would be in Valhalla. His chances of being welcomed there seemed...tenuous. He could only hope that dying the way he was going to would make up for the rest of his sins. It wouldn't be glorious battle, but it *would* be in service of something greater than himself.

At least he would be dead and wouldn't have to be the one to eliminate the reality that contained the man he loved. This was what it meant to be untethered from the threads of the universe. If there was another way, he would take it. But he didn't think there was. This universe was crumbling and it would take another with it. Better to save one. Better to save the one where he hadn't killed his brother.

This was why he wasn't a hero. A hero would equivocate, would agonize. *But how can I wipe out this universe? How can I wipe out trillions?* To which Loki could only bury a metaphorical head in metaphorical hands and reply, *This is what you get, Norns, when you let me call the shots.*

Stephen's breathing changed and Loki didn't know if he wanted him to wake up or not. This moment felt like it was suspended in time, but if anything changed, if anything moved, the spell would be broken.

Hmph. Time. Spells. The two things that they could control. But not this time.

After a moment, Stephen asked in a low voice, "How long have you been awake?"

Loki tucked his fingers into Stephen's, feeling Stephen's scars against his palm. "It doesn't matter."

He felt a hand move his hair, and then a beard tickling his shoulder and neck as Stephen kissed

him above the collarbone. “Never really been into guys with long, flowing hair,” he murmured, as he ran his hand through it, his fingers catching on Loki’s loose curls.

With a breath of laughter, Loki said, “Well, there’s a first time for everything.”

This was banal.

He never wanted it to end.

Stephen wrapped his arms around Loki and pulled him closer, and there was such a vulnerability in it, such an admission of feeling, of trying to cling to something that was already slipping away, that Loki simply let Stephen hold him. Neither of them were sentimental men, and yet—well, maybe everyone had their moments.

Stephen put his face to the crook of Loki’s neck, Loki covered Stephen’s hand with his, and the two of them laid there in silence, hearts beating in the dark. The dark, which Loki hated, but there had always been a few people in his life that made it bearable. They were all dead, except the man he was lying with now.

Feeling lips brush his neck, Loki said, “I don’t think I’m going to be able to fall back asleep.” It sounded idiotic coming out of his mouth. Plaintive. Childish.

“Yeah.” Stephen kissed Loki’s collarbone, then his shoulder, then sighed. “Me either.”

Loki cast a spell and the lamp next to Strange’s bed turned on. Reluctantly, he shifted, turning to lie on his back and look at Strange. Stephen’s arm stayed draped over him, stroking his side lightly. “I know what I have to do,” Loki said simply.

“I thought you were probably going to say that.”

Loki gave him a smile laced with shards of glass and the blackness of incipient loss. “I have to admit, it’s not my best plan ever. I hope I’m not being presumptuous, but I think you, in particular, aren’t going to like it.”

Propping his elbow on his pillow, and then his head on a hand, Strange said, “Okay. Just hit me with it, then.”

The Tesseract seemed to reach for him, glowing brighter in his awareness. Was it trying to communicate with him? Was it trying to tell him he was right? That this was right?

Or maybe he was losing it.

On second thought, it was pretty clear that he’d lost it a long time ago. “I’m going to use the Tesseract to go to the other universe, the one I split apart. I’m going to save the version of me that died there...and I’m going to die in his place. And then he’s going to come back here and put the Tesseract back where I found it.” He stopped, swallowed, and held Stephen’s gaze. “He’ll erase everything. But.” And this was the important part. “But you can make sure he finds Thor. His Thor. Not my Thor. I can still fix this, even if it’s not in this universe.”

“Loki,” Stephen said. He looked at a loss for words. Surely he wasn’t surprised? Surely he knew that the only way any of this could end was tragedy? Loki was broken. He couldn’t let anyone love him, not for any length of time, because he couldn’t stop hating himself. How could he do anything *but* hate himself, when the reason Thor was dead was because of him? He couldn’t sit here, living his life, while his brother was dead here and alive somewhere else.

Stephen smoothed Loki's hair back from his forehead, then pressed his lips together and looked down, his gaze locked on nothing. Or perhaps on something so far away that Loki couldn't hope to see it. "I think you're right," he said, his voice sounding a little strangled. "And I can't tell you not to."

The reflex to argue had already risen in him. People had been telling him he was wrong his whole life, that his plans weren't the right way to do things, even though they usually worked. Maybe it shouldn't have surprised him that Stephen was different. After all, Stephen had been different from the beginning. "I am. And no," Loki finally agreed. "You can't."

Raising his eyes to Loki's again, Stephen said, "But I don't like it." There was a long, long silence, and finally Stephen said, "You could fix it yourself." He hesitated. "You could live in that universe." Reaching down to run a hand along Loki's face, he added with a heartbreaking smile, "I hate to think of a universe without a Loki. Where would we all be without you keeping us on our toes?"

What Loki wanted to do was bury his face in his hands and cry—for himself, for his brother, for Stephen Strange, for this universe. For the other universe's Thor, who'd lost his brother, too. But he met Stephen's eyes, his gaze steady, his voice even more so. He was good at this. Wear the mask. Keep yourself hidden, especially when you were breaking. "Yes, I do." He hesitated. "You told me about the Hippocratic Oath, remember? Do no harm? I've done more than my fair share of it." His eyes dropped away from Stephen's, staring towards the opposite wall, and he picked at the sheet under his hands as he went on more quietly, "And I could have lived with it. All the harm I've caused. But I can't live without my brother, not after what I did to him."

"Thor made a choice," Stephen said.

Loki's throat closed and he struggled to swallow, the mask slipping. Then, he said, "Thor made the choice he always did: to save me. I killed him. I killed him, Stephen. That thing that I brought here, I—" He squeezed his eyes shut tightly. "You'll tell me I didn't mean to, and that's true. But my brother is dead because of me."

"Loki," Stephen murmured, sounding almost adrift himself. Helpless, perhaps, because he wanted to ease Loki's pain and knew that he was powerless to. Stephen pulled him close, and Loki buried his face in the crook of his neck and breathed and tried not to cry. He felt Stephen kiss his forehead gently.

The hurt felt like it might swallow him whole. Blackness yawned in front of him, so visceral, so grasping, that he let out a hiss and felt his whole body tense. This was why he'd kept pushing it away, these months at the Sanctum. He wasn't strong enough to deal with it. He would break under the weight of the pain. He'd already broken, that day that he'd destroyed everything, and just hadn't realized it yet. "You've known all this time what happened," Loki said into Stephen's skin. "And you never said anything."

Stroking Loki's hair, Stephen made a noise, then said, "You needed time. Who knows, maybe my bedside manner's better than I give myself credit for."

With a laugh that sounded a little wild to his ears, Loki replied, "And normally you don't have any problem crediting yourself with all manner of sterling qualities."

Stephen just hugged him close and kissed his head again, and Loki breathed in his scent and told himself that he didn't deserve this. The black yanked at him, pulling tendrils of him into it, and he knew that he should just give in but he was too contrary, too stubborn, and so he held on, he clung. His fingers tightened around Stephen's arm.

Somehow, he drifted off, curled against Stephen, because then he was waking up. Had it been a minute or an hour? It was still dark outside and the lamp was still on. Stephen's trembling fingers were stroking his hair. Softly, Stephen said, "There's a Thor in the other universe."

Loki thought about pretending he was still asleep. But he needed to act like he had this under control, even if he clearly didn't. He was still a Prince of Asgard and a god. As much as he wanted to curl up in bed with this beautiful, baffling, incredible human and kiss him until his lips were numb and never leave, never think about anything else, that wasn't who he was.

So he moved back a little, making eye contact with Stephen. Shaking his head, he said, "He's not my Thor." He remembered the man he'd seen in that house in Norway, the emptiness in his eyes, the weight of defeat slung around his shoulders. That wasn't his brother. He couldn't step in and help that man. "I think," he said slowly, "that the change is too great. Our lives have diverged too much." *I can't fix him and he can't fix me. And I don't know if his Loki can, either, but he's better equipped to do it than I am.*

Stephen sighed and closed his eyes. "And you said *I'm* one of the good guys."

With a bitter smile, Loki said, "You are. *You* don't have to make up for what you've done. I do. And this is the next best thing after doing no harm. I can put some of it right. I can salvage one universe, at least. And I can give Thor and myself a chance to be a family somewhere, even if it isn't here."

Doing no harm: the Loki way. Destroy a universe that you yourself created, because you didn't understand the full ramifications of your actions. Loki knew, god or no, that he didn't have the right to make this decision for an entire universe full of people. But he was going to do it anyway. At least he could point to himself and say he was going to take the first bullet. And it probably would hurt a lot more to be killed by Thanos, rather than to simply stop existing.

There was a silence, and then Stephen opened his eyes and looked at Loki again. He didn't say anything, but then he murmured, "You're...something."

Loki snorted. "Usually people don't hesitate to tell me exactly what they think of me."

A smile twitched at Stephen's mouth. "Something special," he said. "Something that..." He hesitated, not speaking again for so long that Loki thought he wasn't going to. But then, he said, "I'm not great at this. I never...well, I let things get in the way. I wanted them in the way, I guess. It's a lot easier when you're not, you know..."

Loki knew. He didn't need Stephen to say it. Things were a lot easier when you didn't let yourself fall in love. Otherwise, you might find yourself in a situation where you found the love of your life, only to have to turn around and destroy your own universe and everyone in it.

An oddly specific scenario, and yet, why was he not surprised to find himself in it?

His choice wasn't just about Thor. How could he go live in another universe without this man? This mortal, this human, who had chosen to love him, when he made loving him one of the most difficult things in the world? If he did that, he'd have an eternity to regret it.

Stephen moved a hand down to Loki's chest, resting his fingers over his heart. "You're something," he repeated softly.

With a helpless noise, Loki kissed him fiercely, pushing Stephen into the mattress and covering his body with his own. Borrowed time and Strange's tenderness made him want, made him ache, made

him desperate. In between tongues in each other's mouths and bruising kisses, Loki gasped, "Do me a favor, Stephen?"

"Mmph," Stephen replied, his hand already between Loki's legs.

For a moment, Loki lost himself in the feeling of Stephen touching him, pleasure and desire making his head spin, and then he said, "Make me think about something else."

Stephen put one hand on Loki's hip and wrapped the other around his inner thigh, shoving Loki off him and then rolling on top of him, his weight feeling like the one thing that was still tethering Loki to this world. "Any requests?" he asked as he lowered his head to suck at Loki's neck and his hand continued what it had been doing before, stroking up and down and practically making Loki whimper.

He twisted his fingers in Stephen's hair. As heat rose to his skin, he ground his hips into Stephen's, unable to stop the moan fighting its way out of his chest. "Just fuck me, Strange," he breathed.

Stephen groaned into his neck, then kissed Loki hard. And then, well, Loki was a god, and occasionally, people did what he asked them to.

Chapter 18

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)



It was the last time they'd wake up together.

Even if they had one more night, Loki knew he wouldn't sleep. And he didn't know how to savor waking up with someone for the last time. He'd never been a person who came slowly awake. Particularly after his Fall, it hadn't been...*prudent*...to take his time waking up. If he thought about it, which he was, lying there, wide awake at Stephen's side, he'd been sleeping with one eye open since he'd let go of Gungnir, a lifetime ago on the Rainbow Bridge. With the exception of the four days he'd spent unconscious after Ghaszaszh Nyirh had nearly killed him, he hadn't slept soundly in years. And, to be honest, it was hard to count a coma as restful sleep.

There was a knock at the door and Stephen started awake. "Your shift, Stephen," Wong's voice said from outside. When Stephen just made a noise, Wong asked, his tone—gentler? "Do you need a few minutes?"

One of Stephen's hands went over his eyes, rubbing at them, and the other hooked around Loki's waist, fingers stuttering over his ribs. "Yeah," he said. "I'll be out." He let out a slow breath, his hand still over his eyes, as the sound of Wong's footsteps receded. Loki didn't speak, instead focusing all his attention on the sensation of Stephen's fingers on his skin. "You can stay here and get some more sleep," Strange said, finally opening his eyes and turning his head to look at Loki.

Reaching out a hand, Loki flicked at the hair that flopped over Stephen's forehead. "Unlikely. Anyway, you promised me a shower together yesterday." *Yesterday*. Gods. How had it only been twenty-four hours?

A better question: how could the Norns only have given them twenty-four hours? In the end, they would only have a couple days like this.

Unless Loki chose to wait.

And oh, it was tempting. Holding Stephen's gaze, it was the most tempting thing that had possibly ever been dangled in front of him. Maybe he was just being melodramatic. But would this be easier in a week? A month? A year? The longer he waited, the worse things would get. And the worse things got here, the greater the possibility that something happened to the other universe's Thor.

Stephen laughed, despite the sadness in his eyes. That was better. Loki spent so much time being miserable, the last thing he needed was everyone around him feeling the same way. With a smile that existed somewhere on the spectrum between sly and innocent—possibly at more than one point—Loki asked, “How long do I have before you start feeling guilty about Wong covering for you?”

Stephen returned the smile, shaking his head. Well, what Loki was doing was rather transparent, but it was better than wallowing. The decision was made. Everyone's time was finite, but everyone's in this universe had just got much more finite. That just meant they had to make the most of the time they had.

He almost snorted at himself. For heaven's sake. It sounded a bit too much like he was trying to get into the business of inspirational aphorisms. Perhaps he could come up with something that could be slapped on a piece of mass-produced wall art. Imagine, him being famous for something besides chaos. There wasn't quite enough mischief to it. People would believe he'd been earnest.

Raising an eyebrow, Loki asked, “Well?”

Stephen reached down down and Loki drew in a sharp breath of air. “Mm, fifteen minutes?” Strange said, his tone pondering. His hand moved. “Make it ten.”

“We were talking about *you*,” Loki said, though it was hard to sound disgruntled, considering.

Getting out of bed, Stephen offered his hand to Loki. “What can I say, I like a challenge,” he said, amusement in his voice.

It was longer than ten minutes. Twenty, maybe. And they used up all the hot water. And Loki's legs were shaking when they were finished, but, it had to be noted as a point of pride, so were Stephen's. When they'd gotten dressed and Loki had voiced his intention to sit upstairs with Stephen, Strange said, “Fine, but please eat something.” When Loki made a face, Stephen said, “Come on. Let me feel like I took care of you, at least once.”

Loki blinked at him. “But,” he said uncertainly, “you saved my life.”

Stephen shrugged. “You know what I mean.” Loki wasn't sure he did. Saving his life certainly qualified as taking care of him in his book. Not just saving his life. Bringing him here, nursing him back to health. Making sure he healed. What was all that if not being taken care of? But clearly Stephen meant something else. Something more intangible, maybe, unrelated to his former life as a doctor. Something deeper that had less to do with his body and more to do with his soul.

As they came to the staircase, he put both of his hands to Loki's head and kissed him softly. Loki closed his eyes and kissed him back. He hated that he could imagine doing this for the rest of his life. They never would have had that, anyway, so it was stupid to feel its loss.

For once, it was quiet. Perhaps Ultimus was puzzling over how to break out of the mirror dimension. At one point, the door from the London Sanctum opened and another Master came in to have a discussion with Strange. Of course, she pointed at Loki, looking alarmed, and asked, “Who's that?”

Strange looked resigned. Truly, it had only been a matter of time until the rest of the order figured out that he was there. Not much point in hiding it anymore. “The reason we’ve been managing as well as we have been over here,” he said.

She looked like she was listening to something just outside the range of Loki’s hearing, and then her eyes widened and she said, “*Him*.”

“He’s my guest,” Strange said. In a tone that carried with it just the merest hint of threat, he added, “And he’s under my protection.”

Loki crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall, wanting to laugh that he didn’t need protection. Still. It was one of those ‘you know what I mean’ situations. Staring at him warily, the other Master said, “I’m not saying anything in front of him.”

At this, Stephen laughed, but he didn’t explain that it was because there was precious little she could say that Loki didn’t already know.

After she’d left, Strange looked thoughtful, perhaps troubled, with a little irritation shaded in. “Nothing good’s going to come of that,” he said. “If they really think some of the stuff we’ve been doing—that any of that was *our* magic—I mean, I’m good, obviously, but I can’t do Asgardian magic, and they had to have recognized the difference—” He blew a huff of air out through his nose. “I won’t let them make trouble for you.”

“Stephen,” Loki said gently. “I’ll be gone soon. It won’t matter.”

Stephen’s jaw clenched and his throat bobbed. But then he said, “Yeah. Except I have to think about the other Loki that you’re going to bring here.”

Oh. Loki hadn’t thought about that.

Stephen seemed to steady himself. Well, it was just pushing down what you were feeling and putting on the face that you wanted the world to see. What was so difficult about that? “If he even wants to hang around. No offense, but it seems like kind of a stretch that he’s going to want to do what you *think* he’s going to do.” He looked tired. Worn down. “And I’m the one that has to convince him to do it.”

“Oh,” Loki said. “I think it will be better coming from you. I don’t like myself very much, so I’m really the *worst* person to convince another version of myself to do something.”

Stephen very much looked like he didn’t want to smile at this, but Loki had delivered it in a tone that was *meant* to draw out a smile. Withering and self-deprecating, but with enough fatalistic cheerfulness that it couldn’t help but be a little funny. “How do you know he’s going to help?” Strange asked.

Loki’s brow furrowed. “Well, because,” he said. “He’ll want to save Thor.” When Stephen stared at him, he sighed. “He died doing so once already. He’ll do what he has to do to protect his brother.” It felt very odd to talk about a version of himself in this way, as a separate person—which the other Loki *was* (would be?). But it was the life he would have lived, had he not changed things. Did that make them the same person?

He snorted delicately. How odd, to be thinking about another version of himself to begin with. It was even odder to consider how their lives had diverged. In the past six years, how different had they become? Would Loki even *recognize* this other version of himself? Not physically, of course, that was obvious, but emotionally. Mentally. What had he gone through? What had him and Thor

gone through?

There was something heartening about the fact that in the other universe, the two of them had found each other and made amends, too. As though there were certain truths, certain threads that the Norns spun out across the multiverse that couldn't help but be the same.

Raising an eyebrow, Loki said, "I know that I'm not..." His tongue wet his lips. "...particularly *stable*. That I perhaps seem as though I don't really know myself, and that suddenly, now that it's necessary to know myself in a very literal way, that there might seem every reason to call into question what I'm saying." Loki actually paused here, waiting for the interruption that anyone else in his life would have made. But Stephen simply waited. A smile twitched at the corner of Loki's mouth and he went on, "But I'm occasionally capable of taking a step back and assessing my motivations. There's a...a clarity that comes, when you know you're at the end."

The nascent smile faded from his face. "My brother means everything to me. I'm certain that in the other universe...Thor meant everything to that version of Loki, too."

Looking like he was considering his words carefully, Stephen said, "I guess no one knows yourself better than you."

With a joyless laugh, Loki replied, "Actually, I'm not sure that's true. I think Thor might have known me better." His face froze, stricken, and he added, "I suppose Thor isn't here to advise you, though. Shame. He became much more level-headed than I ever gave him credit for."

He didn't say the other thing he was thinking: that Stephen probably knew Loki better than he knew himself. Thor and Stephen both saw Loki more clearly than he ever could. All he saw were his inadequacies, his mistakes. His failures. Where he didn't measure up and where he never would.

There was something funny about that. The clarity to see that others saw more to him than that, but not enough of it to see what they did. Funny enough that he chuckled, then stopped when Stephen just stared at him. "Forgive me," he said, though he didn't really mean it. Better to go to one's death amused at the Norns' sense of humor. Turning his hands out in a gesture of surrender and nescience, he said, "Reverting to form at the end. I'm a trickster. I'm supposed to have fun."

He put his fingers to his forehead, applying almost enough pressure to leave marks when he eventually moved them. Footsteps crossed the room, and suddenly Stephen was at his side and his hand was on Loki's shoulder. "Feeling talkative, I guess," Stephen said, a smile in his voice. Loki didn't move his fingers, but he shifted his eyes to give Strange a sidelong look. "I always got the feeling that you're talking so much in your head that you forget to say most of it out loud."

"I don't forget," Loki said. "I just know better."

Eventually, he thought, he would have opened up to Stephen more. Allowed some of his thoughts to make his way from his brain to his mouth and invited the man into his confidence. That was why he wanted more time, wasn't it? The sex was great, but it was everything else.

Stephen's hand squeezed his shoulder, Loki covered his hand with one of his, and the two of them continued their watch.

As morning turned to afternoon turned to evening, they went downstairs to the kitchen to get something to eat. Loki had a feeling it was so Stephen could *make* him eat. What was the point? He wasn't hungry and soon it wouldn't matter. But—if it made Stephen happy, it was something easy to do. Loki had never been very good at making people happy.

In the kitchen, as Stephen made a cup of tea, Loki told him what he knew of his other self's death. Which wasn't much, he realized as he verbalized it. "I think it must have been on a spaceship," he said musingly.

"Why?"

Furrowing his brow, he replied, "Because the Valkyrie said that Thanos killed him."

"You said that name before," Stephen remarked, sipping at his tea.

"Yes."

Stephen watched him. "Are you going to tell me who it is?"

Loki opened his mouth, his eyebrows still drawn together, and then he said slowly, "No. I don't think...it's not helpful. Suffice it to say that Thanos would not have been pleased with me. And those who displease Thanos...well." He wondered what had happened to Thanos here. Perhaps Ultimus had known he was a threat and destroyed him.

It could have been anywhere, he supposed. But the Valkyrie had said the other Loki had died protecting their people. And he'd done some math. There couldn't have been more than two hundred people in New Asgard. If half had been killed in the Snap, that made four hundred to start with. If Thanos, when he had encountered them in whatever incident that the other Loki had been killed, had massacred half of Asgard's population, then there had been, at most, eight hundred Asgardians when he'd found them. Which meant something terrible must have happened on Asgard. Whatever it was must have been the reason that Asgard's remaining population had ended up on Earth. Refugees. They had evacuated, been swooped down on, and slaughtered.

"A spaceship, I think," Loki repeated firmly.

Stephen leaned against the counter. "Don't you need to know the exact time and place?" he asked, wrapping his hands around his mug.

Loki waved a hand. "Oh, the Tesseract will take care of all of that for me. For an inanimate object, it really does quite a good impression of being sentient."

"Infinity Stones," Strange muttered.

That about summed it up. Fleeting, he wondered why the TVA hadn't taken care of this already. Perhaps Ultimus had already taken them out. It was what Loki would have done if he were trying to conquer the multiverse. Not that he'd ever been impressed by the Time Variance Authority's competence, but they were one less obstacle if they were gone.

"Anyway," Loki said briskly, "I think it will do what I want. Even if I don't—I mean, the other me, Surtur's teeth, I sound mad talking about this—even if that universe's version of me is resistant to this idea, the Tesseract won't give him any choice." He hesitated. "*I* won't give him any choice, either."

Raising his eyebrows, Stephen said, "I'm not going to ask what you mean by that."

With a thin smile, Loki said, "You know how difficult I can be. I suppose I should warn you now, you may end up meeting the other universe's version of me in circumstances similar to our first meeting."

"You were unconscious and bleeding to death when I met you," Stephen said.

A tinge of mischief made its way into Loki's smile. "Exactly." He paused and shrugged. "I'll try to keep him conscious, at the very least."

Stephen covered his eyes with his hands. "And maybe *not* bleeding to death."

"Oh, right."

Looking back up at Loki, Stephen said, "This is crazy, and *I'm* the one with the magic, time-manipulation amulet. And it's not going to be easy."

Shrugging and giving him a biting smile, Loki said, "If it were easy, everyone would do it."

At that, a more serious look passed across Stephen's face. He set his mug down on the counter and reached for Loki, putting a hand on his hip. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure 'everyone' is a serious overestimation."

Loki slid his hands onto Stephen's neck, one moving to his head so he could bury his fingers in his hair, the other slipping inside the neck of his robe so he could feel Stephen's skin under his palm. Every time might be the last time. "You almost make me believe all these nice things you say about me," Loki said, grinning crookedly to hide the fact that a knife was twisting in his heart.

Stephen rolled his eyes, but Loki could hardly take offense, considering he then leaned forward so their lips met.

"Are you two figuring out how to save the universe or are you having a moment?" a voice asked.

The two of them broke apart and Stephen shifted back from Loki, out of deference, Loki supposed, to some sort of half-hearted idea of propriety. "It was sort of both," he said.

Wong's eyes flicked back and forth between them, his gaze taking in the way Stephen's hand slipped off of Loki's hip to brace against the edge of the counter. Then, he shrugged and said, "Good for you. *Carpe diem*." Making his way into the kitchen and opening a cupboard, he pulled out a box and said, "I'm just going to eat as much Cap'n Crunch as I want."

Grimacing, Strange said, "That stuff is horrible for you."

His expression as sober as ever, Wong stuck his hand straight into the box, the plastic bag crinkling, and pulled out a handful of cereal to pop into his mouth. Once he'd chewed and swallowed, he said, "I don't know if you should talk, Stephen."

Loki chuckled. "He has a point." When Stephen glanced at him, he added, his smile crooked and sly, "In no sense of the word am I good for anyone."

Staring at Loki, Wong said, "So. The two of you have decided something."

Loki held out a hand, motioning to Stephen. He hoped the message was clear. *Explain to him, please*. After taking a gulp of his tea, Strange did, briefly and emotionlessly, without looking at Loki. When he was finished, Wong remained silent. Then, he said, "The other Masters won't accept this, Stephen. You know they won't." He set the box of cereal down and put his hands on his hips. When Strange grimaced, Wong said, "They'll say he's twisted your mind."

With a scoff, Stephen said, "That's ridiculous."

"It's what they'll say, ridiculous or not," Wong said. He glanced at Loki and inclined his head. "If it matters, I know there's no truth to it."

Loki felt a strange sensation in his chest. Was he...touched? By the fact that Wong had felt the need to say this? Whoever would have thought, those months ago, that he'd become friends with these people? With a tilt of his head, a sidelong look, and an acerbic smile, he said, "My mind control days are long over."

A grim recognition of Wong's point had settled on Strange's face. "We can't let them find out, then." Something seemed to occur to him and he asked, "How do *you* feel about it?"

Wong was silent. Even for someone who chose his words carefully, he clearly wanted to be deliberate when he next spoke. Finally, he said, "I trust your judgement and your commitment to safeguarding this world from harm. If you feel this is the only path..." He trailed off, then met Strange's eyes and asked quietly, "How many futures did you look at?"

Strange put a hand to the Eye and didn't answer at first. When he spoke, he sounded pained. "Five hundred trillion, eight hundred and twenty-two billion, five million, six hundred and eighteen thousand, nine hundred and seventy-six."

Loki stared at him. Strange looked defeated.

Nodding slowly, Wong asked, as though he already knew the answer, "How many did this universe survive in?"

After a second, Strange raised his head, then simply shook it.

Wong nodded again. "As I said. I trust you."

The gratitude on Strange's face was simple, and he said, "Thank you, my friend," in such a painless way that Loki could't help but be envious. He'd never shown his emotions in an uncomplicated way in his entire life.

"When will you do it?" Wong asked.

"Tomorrow," Loki said without hesitating. Stephen looked at him, his expression unreadable, and Loki returned his gaze unblinkingly. Waiting wouldn't make it easier. *Waiting wouldn't make it easier*. Right. If he repeated it to himself long enough, he'd be dead, and it would be a moot point.

Perhaps he wouldn't say that out loud.

There was another long silence. Then, Wong stepped forward and held out a hand to Loki. He stared at it in confusion, his eyebrows drawn together, before he realized what was happening. As he reached out and shook Wong's hand, Wong said, "When Stephen brought you here, I thought you'd be more trouble than you were worth. I'm happy to have been proved wrong."

"That's nearly a declaration of love from you, Master Wong," Loki said, a half-smile on his face.

Wong looked, for a fraction of a second, like he was going to laugh. But the moment passed, and all he said was, "I'll leave that sort of thing to Stephen." Glancing between them, he said, "I'll take tonight's shift."

Which was Loki's. He knew he should argue, but—well, he also knew that these would be his last hours.

And quite frankly, he didn't want to spend them watching for interdimensional breakthroughs.

"I appreciate that," Loki said, inclining his head.

Wong nodded once, then made his way out of the kitchen, patting Stephen on the shoulder as he went. When he was gone, Loki reached for a granola bar and ate it without tasting it. It had to be said, Earth had more convenient snack options than Asgard ever had. Stephen watched him eat, then wordlessly handed him another. Loki rolled his eyes, but he ate that one, too.

“So,” Stephen said. “What do you want to do?”

The ‘on your last night’ part of that was unspoken. Loki smiled grimly. *Look at you. Listen to you speak. Feel your skin on mine.* “I’d say I want you to put us in a time loop, but I wouldn’t want you to get in trouble with Wong.”

Stephen chuckled. “Yeah. Wouldn’t want that.” His hand reached out, trembling, and took Loki’s.

Breathing in, then out slowly, Loki said, “It doesn’t matter. As long as—” But he couldn’t make the words come out, because he didn’t say things like *as long as it’s with you*. Of course, he’d fallen for Doctor Stephen Strange, who saw through him. And he didn’t need to say it out loud. “Can we go upstairs?” he said instead, hearing a plaintive note to his own voice. A pain, a sadness, that he didn’t want to admit to.

Stephen squeezed his hand and smiled crookedly. “Look at that. The God of Mischief is *asking*.”

“A momentary lapse,” Loki said.

Moving his head to brush his lips across Loki’s, Stephen said, “You didn’t actually have to.”

Loki closed his eyes, squeezing them tight.

He was glad he wouldn’t have much time to miss this.

Chapter 19

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The sun came up faster than Loki thought reasonable. Where had the hours gone? His eyes were sandy but he didn't feel tired, exactly. Just...resigned. Ready. And at the same time, not ready at all. His head was on Stephen's shoulder as the two of them leaned against the headboard of the bed, Loki's leg hooked over Stephen's and Stephen's fingers rubbing circles in Loki's palm.

They had talked about everything, and yet, what Loki didn't say could have filled libraries. How did you compress a thousand years into ten hours? Especially when he wanted to listen to Stephen talk more than he wanted to hear his own voice. They made love. Had Loki ever applied that phrase to any of the times he'd slept with someone? He didn't think so. But it was the right one for this, and the way afterwards they laid there kissing each other slowly, Stephen's fingers in Loki's hair, Loki's hands running up and down his back.

But now it was morning. Loki didn't see much point in showering, and Stephen didn't bother. If Loki was romantic, he'd have wondered if it was because Stephen wanted Loki's scent on him a little longer. But Loki wasn't romantic, so, well.

Strange went upstairs to tell Wong they were leaving and Loki trailed after him, standing and looking at the Oculus until he returned. When he did, he simply stared at Loki, looking like he was pouring every ounce of his willpower into keeping his expression free from crushing sadness.

Then, he held up a finger and said, "Hold on. We never listened to any music. We never *danced*."

"I don't dance," Loki said automatically.

Stephen rolled his eyes. "Of course you don't. Do you listen to music?"

“I’ve been known to.”

Shaking his head and smiling, Stephen walked into the Chamber of Relics. There was a dusty old gramophone on a table there—well, appropriate place for it, as it was certainly a relic—with a stack of records on a shelf beneath it. Stephen flipped through them, made a noise, and pulled one out, sliding it out of the case and flipping it onto the turntable. He turned the gramophone on and put the needle down, and the record crackled.

Loki took the opportunity to look around the room one last time, the Oculus casting white light across everything as the sun rose outside. As the music began playing, Stephen came to Loki’s side. A woman’s voice came on, singing, *We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when, but I know we’ll meet again some sunny day. Keep smiling through, just like you always do, ‘til the blue skies drive the dark clouds far away...*

“‘We’ll Meet Again,’ Ross Parker and Hughie Charles. 1939. Made popular by Vera Lynn,” Strange said, catching Loki’s fingertips in his.

“Maudlin in the extreme,” Loki said, though he didn’t roll his eyes. “And when have I ever kept smiling through anything?”

With a small laugh, Stephen said, “You do, actually, and you know you do.”

“Well.” Loki slipped his hand further into Stephen’s, intertwining their fingers. “I wouldn’t be much of a trickster if I couldn’t see the fun in just about anything. Or the humor, at the very least.” He put his other hand on Stephen’s neck, Stephen’s skin feeling hot against Loki’s cold fingers. The Cloak shivered, and Loki smiled crookedly. “You know, we’ve never talked about how your cape has always seemed to like me.”

The Cloak’s collar caressed Loki’s hand once, and then its edges flared out around Strange and wrapped around the two of them, drawing them closer together. Loki found his chest pressed to Stephen’s, the feeling of Stephen’s heart thumping through his own sternum. With a sigh, he dropped his reservations and buried his face in the side of Stephen’s neck, closing his eyes and breathing in his scent.

They remained that way, Stephen turning his head so that his face was pressed to Loki’s hair. It wasn’t dancing, but perhaps they swayed to the song. Just a little.

So will you please say hello to the folks that I know, they’ll be happy to know that as you saw me go I was singing this song...

Humans were absurd. Sentimental fools, who always believed there was more than what they could see, that there was some cosmic force for good that brought people together for a reason, and would see to it that they were together in the end, whatever ‘the end’ looked like. They didn’t want to believe in the universe as it was, which was cruel, capricious and uncaring by turns. The Norns spun all of their fates, but they didn’t control them. There was no rhyme or reason, no destiny. There were only choices and the people you surrounded yourself with.

In the end, Loki thought he’d done well with one of those things. And if he’d made too many poor choices to count, at least this final one mattered. At least this final choice was to do something good.

Speaking of sentimental fools.

He straightened up and looked into Stephen’s eyes, tightened his hold on his hand, and smoothed

his fingers over the gray hair at Stephen's temple. He was beautiful, Stephen Strange, scarred hands and all.

"Not to be really corny, but who knows, maybe in the other universe..." Stephen hesitated, then smiled and ran a thumb over Loki's cheekbone. "Maybe they'll figure out what we did."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "The versions of us there? Well. That would require a number of coincidences, not the least of which being that we only ended up this way because chance brought us together." Loki paused. "And don't say it was fate."

With a chuckle, Strange said, "Yeah, okay. I won't."

"And quite honestly," Loki went on, "I'm not convinced that this wasn't just because it was... convenient."

Rolling his eyes, Stephen asked, "Do you really think that?"

No.

Loki shrugged.

Stephen held Loki's eyes. Then, he said, "It may have just been chance, but if the other universe's me is anything like...well, me, and the other you is like you, then I'm going to be honest, I don't see how alternate reality Stephen Strange doesn't end up falling for you, too."

Loki's heart did something tectonic in his chest. But, raising his eyebrows, all he said was, "Technically, aren't *you* alternate reality Stephen Strange?" As though he was going to address what Stephen had said, instead of choosing to be pedantic. Well, Stephen should know him well enough by now to know that he'd avoid the substance of what someone was saying to him, especially if it dealt with anything resembling affection or trust. Or love.

Stephen's arm circled Loki's waist. "Yeah," he said. "I guess so."

With a breath of laughter, Loki leaned into Stephen and said, "You shouldn't discount my capacity for stubbornness and pathological belief in my own unworthiness. If our counterparts should meet, I can only imagine he'll fight feeling like this every step of the way."

His mouth twitching into a lopsided smile, Stephen said, "At least you recognize that it's pathological."

Loki snorted. "Thanks."

"You kind of walked into it."

"True." Loki leaned forward and kissed Stephen softly, keeping his eyes closed after he'd pulled away. "You'll meet my counterpart soon."

Stephen's arm tightened. "I know what you're thinking," he said. Loki opened his eyes and looked into Stephen's. They were steady, intense, and bright with emotion. "Don't."

Laughing mirthlessly, Loki said, "You should know by now that I never stop thinking."

"I know. But don't think that."

Loki drew in a deep, slow breath, and told a lie. "It's alright. If you...do. I don't know what he'll be like, but he'll still be me, in some sense."

Stephen put his trembling hands on either side of Loki's face. "Don't," he repeated. He pulled Loki towards him and kissed him, then murmured into his mouth, "There isn't anyone like you." Their lips brushed and Loki wrapped his arms around Stephen, closing his eyes as the kiss deepened. The two of them stood there while the record played, and Loki thanked and cursed the Norns for breaking him and giving him this. This beautiful thing that he didn't deserve, had never looked for, and couldn't keep. Were they laughing? Or did they have hearts to break, too?

It was only when the record had reached its end, hissing on the inner groove, that the two of them separated. Loki let his fingers ghost over the gray hair at Stephen's temples again, and he smiled. "You and my brother would have gotten along. He was a do-gooder, too. And you could have commiserated with each other about how difficult I am."

"I have a feeling Thor's the kind of guy who wouldn't hear a bad word against his little brother," Stephen said, returning the smile. Loki appreciated his use of the present tense. Thor was gone, but not completely while Loki was still here. Once he was gone too...well, Asgard was no more, anyway. Perhaps it was only right that her remaining sons followed her. Two sons of the crown, adrift for so long now. Loki drew in a slow breath. He hoped he'd see Thor again soon. He hoped he'd done enough to follow his family to Valhalla. He hoped they would welcome him.

Stephen took his hands in his own, his thumbs shakily stroking Loki's knuckles, and Loki said, his voice feeling like it might crack apart, "I miss him." He had been such a fool, such an idiot; he'd spent so long torn between bitterness and jealousy and though his love had never dimmed, it had been too easy to push it aside. Once upon a time, Loki would perhaps have stolen the Time Stone to put things back to the way he wanted them to be. Now, though, he couldn't do it. He couldn't do more harm.

Squeezing his hands, Stephen said, "I know." He sighed. "I've always known that."

Loki almost apologized for being so damaged, so broken, when Stephen deserved someone whole. Old habits died hard, though. He never apologized, not for anything. Not for anything that mattered, at least. He drew in a breath through his nose to steady himself. There *was* one loose end, one thing he hadn't been able to contemplate until the last couple days. "Do you know what happened to Thor's body?" he asked, trying to maintain an even tone.

What was left of it.

Stephen hesitated before he said, "My main concern was getting you to the hospital. You were alive, barely."

Right. It had been a foolish question. Thor's body was probably locked in some government facility. Whatever pieces of SHIELD were left, officially sanctioned or not. It was a horrible thought, his brother's remains being...*studied*.

"But," Stephen said, and Loki looked at him sharply. "Wong stayed behind to make sure...that is, we thought there might be...*people*...who wouldn't show the right respect. We didn't really have a plan, the whole thing was...I mean, it was...a bad scene. It was..."

Loki could fill in the blanks. *It was the worst thing I've ever seen.*

"We didn't really talk before I left, is what I'm trying to say," Stephen said. "You were bleeding out; to this day I don't know how you made it." He shook his head. "I went back, and Thor...he wasn't there. Wong said he—" Stephen gestured vaguely. "—turned to light. That sound like something that happens?"

Tears stung at Loki's eyes, sudden and sharp. Before he could stop it, one slipped out, sliding down his cheek, a burning track across his face. "Yes," he said, his voice still even. "That sounds like something that happens."

He'd miscounted. Two loose ends. Swiping the back of his hand across his nose, which was suddenly leaking, he said, "I have to do something before we go."

Without speaking, Stephen nodded, then brushed his fingers over Loki's face, wiping the tear away gently. He seemed to understand that Loki needed to do whatever it was alone, because he stepped back. The Cloak of Levitation rippled. "Whenever you're ready," Stephen said quietly.

Loki tried to swallow, couldn't, and just nodded jerkily, before he turned and walked down the stairs to his room. He closed the door with a quiet click, then opened the window. For a moment, he stood there, listening to the pigeons coo gently. His chest felt tight, too small for his heart, too small for the grief that had been living inside him, clawing a bigger and bigger space for itself. Eventually, there would have been nothing but his grief. It would have taken him over, eaten him alive.

He closed his eyes and remembered happier days. He remembered his brother, before everything had gone wrong. Tears slipped out from beneath his eyelids, and he knelt on the ground beneath the window, bowing his head and putting his hands on his knees, palms facing towards the ceiling. Towards the sky.

"Thor, son of Odin," he said softly. "I bid you take your place in the halls of Valhalla, where the brave shall live forever." A single, glowing orb appeared between his hands, hovering at his fingertips. It bobbed there, filled with light, a beacon against the darkness of loss. He swallowed hard and completed the prayer, his voice shaking. "Nor shall we mourn but rejoice for those that have died the glorious death."

Then, he raised his hands. The orb caught on his fingers, and when he released it, it floated upwards, towards the window, and out into the sky.

Loki watched it go, his breathing ragged, tears streaking his face.

"Good-bye, brother," he whispered.

If the Norns will it, I'll see you soon.

He remained there until it was out of sight, and then longer, looking into the blue Midgard sky. Listening to the traffic outside. The pigeons. His own breathing, each breath counting down to his last one.

Odd. That thought didn't bother him.

There was a flutter of wings outside, and Loki thought again of Thor's gentleness with the birds in the dovecote.

He climbed to his feet, rested his palms on the windowsill, and breathed in. Then, he closed the window and went to rejoin Stephen.

They stepped out of the portal onto the brickwork terrace overlooking Bethesda Fountain. The light was shining through the trees, crisp and bright. Everything seemed...more. The sounds of cars whooshing by on Central Park West and Fifth Avenue carrying crystal clear on the air, the occasional sharp car horn blaring. Bethesda Fountain gurgling below, squirrels busily preparing for

winter. Ducks taking off across the water, the flap of their wings cracking on the air. A perfect autumn day, the sort of morning that made you want to bottle it, so you could pull it out later and feel a moment that you'd felt so painfully alive that it had been in every nerve of your body. The kind of day that was so New York that it hurt.

Damn. He really *had* come to love this city.

"Central Park," Loki observed.

Stephen nodded. "All our protections on the city merge here. There's no stronger spot for interdimensional travel."

Loki nodded once, slowly, then again, his head jerking. This was it, then. What did you say at the end?

Stephen sighed and raised a hand. The mirror dimension folded out around them, leaving them isolated from the world. Maybe there *was* nothing to say. Not out loud, anyway.

With a sharp inhale of breath, Loki stepped forward. He put a hand to the back of Stephen's head, pausing to hold his gaze. Then, he brought his other hand up to cup the side of Stephen's face, while Stephen wrapped his arms around Loki's back, and their lips met in a hard, fierce kiss.

There was no way to take in enough of each other in this moment, but they tried, there in the mirror dimension, hands over clothes, mouths on whatever bare skin they could find, Stephen's fingers twisting hard in Loki's hair and all of it, all of it, saying what neither of them ever had out loud.

I love you. I would have loved you for as long you wanted me to.

It really *was* magic, this thing between them.

They broke apart and Loki leaned his forehead against Stephen's. Smiling, because what else could he do, he said, "Thank you for your hospitality, Doctor Strange."

With a quiet snort of laughter, Stephen said, "Yeah. Anytime."

A moment passed. Or maybe it was an hour. It could have been an eternity, and it wouldn't have been long enough. He'd never leave if he didn't just do it, though. Nothing was going to make it easier. No kiss was going to be a good enough last one. He'd never get tired of the feel of Stephen's heart beating.

Stephen ran a hand gently through Loki's hair, then pressed his lips to his forehead. "Good luck, God of Mischief," he murmured, his breath sending shivers through Loki.

Reaching a hand up to twine their fingers together one last time, to feel the scars on the back of Stephen's hand and the way the tremor went still at his touch, Loki said, "You too. I hope the other me is just as much of a challenge as I've been." But he smiled a little crookedly and got a smile in return.

Stephen tightened his fingers around Loki's, and the response was clear. *He won't be you. No one ever will be.*

Or maybe that was just wishful thinking on Loki's part.

Then, Stephen stepped back and circled a hand. The mirror dimension dropped away around them. Loki held up a hand, where the Tesseract shimmered into existence, glowing a bright, steady blue.

People walking by stared, but Loki didn't care. They had no idea how much worse things were going to get.

The two of them held each other's gazes and Loki tightened his grip on the Tesseract as he thought about where he wanted to go. *Bring me to where Loki, son of Odin, died. Bring me to where Thor lost everything.*

Behind him, a portal opened up, darkness, fire, and destruction on the other side. A spaceship, attacked and adrift, its defenses down, its occupants slaughtered. Loki glanced over his shoulder at it, then gave Stephen a crooked half-smile. Stephen returned it, only the lines around his eyes betraying how difficult it was.

Loki took a breath, turned towards the portal, and straightened his shoulders. It turned out, he'd been wrong. You could fight for the greater good *and* the people you loved. You might just have to sacrifice something along the way. Something? Ha. He was Loki. He sacrificed everything and nothing. He'd reach for it all and end up with none of it. He wouldn't be him if he didn't.

Without looking back, he stepped through the portal, into another universe, and onto the deck of *The Statesman*. He couldn't take back the harm that he'd done, the pain that he'd caused. He couldn't ever get his brother back. But he could do this one good thing, and give this universe, the one he wasn't ever supposed to have left, a fighting chance. He could give *this* Thor, and *this* Loki, a chance to be a family.

The portal closed behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who made it this far! I love all of you who have read, kudos, and commented! And a huge thank you again to [the_genderman](#) for their incredible art as well as just being an all around pleasure to work with.

If you're bummed out by the way this ends (and I mean...I am, and I meant everyone to be), there's [a follow up that's more cheerful](#) (which is not saying much I realize, haha).

If you'd like to come hang out with me on tumblr, you can [find me here](#)!

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